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GHOST RECON BREAKPOINT

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Pro member.

IT'S KINDA LIKE THAT.

Cats are cool. But tigers? They're the most feared felines on the planet. So when it comes to PowerUp Rewards Pro members, tiger blood runs in their veins.

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Tigers are more than just kings of the jungle – they're rulers of the animal kingdom. If you're a Pro, you're a tiger. Go ahead, use those benefits and roar.

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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@TheRealAndyMc

Dear Game Informer Community

Recently, as part of a GameStop restructuring plan, our parent company eliminated the positions of about 120 employees across its various offices. We lost seven members of our team – our cohorts, compatriots, and friends. They shaped us and made us who we are today, just like every member of the *Game Informer* team who passes through this company.

I'm saddened by the news; the *Game Informer* team means the world to me. You, our readers who have supported us over the years – mean the world to us. I can't thank them or you enough.

We appreciate the love that has poured out for GI and the affected team members: Matt Bertz, Elise Favis, Javy Gwaltney, Kyle Hilliard, Imran Khan, Jeff Marchiafava, and Suriel Vazquez. They are so talented and so passionate – please support them if you are hiring. Each of them has my highest, most glowing recommendation.

For now, *Game Informer* lives to fight another day. Your support is appreciated.

Cheers,

P.S. Here is how to find them:

Elise Favis @elisefavis
Matt Bertz @mattbertz
Kyle Hilliard @KyleMHilliard
Javy Gwaltney javygwaltney.net
Jeff Marchiafava @GIJeffM
Suriel Vazquez @SurielVazquez
Imran Khan @imranzomg

Please support their work.

♥ the GI Team

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The latest in Ubisoft's tactical co-op shooter is a slight departure for the series, taking place in a fictional open world of Auroa, where rogue drones and survival elements introduce new challenges. Ubisoft is also committing to post-launch support for both its campaign and multiplayer – including the Ghost War PvP suite on day one – to help take this series into the future. ***by Matt Bertz***

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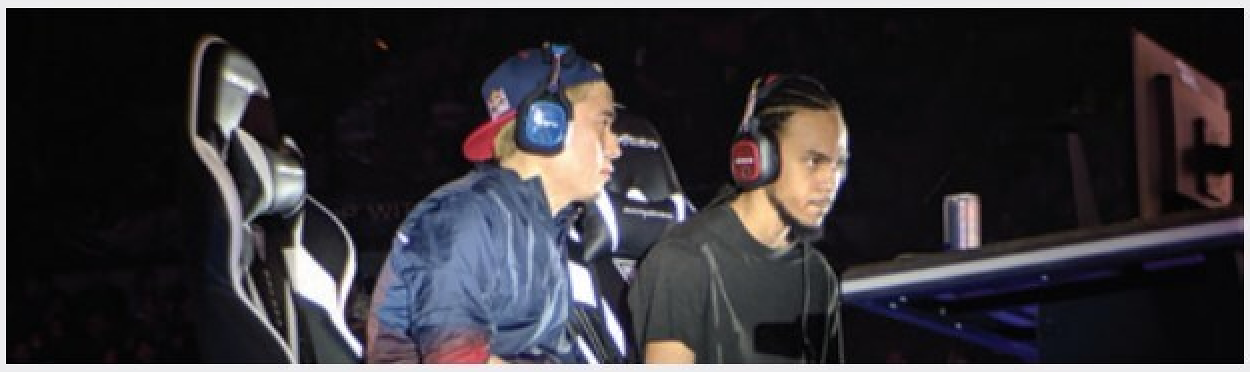
Video game history is being preserved thanks to the tireless efforts of Frank Cifaldi and the Video Game History Foundation. Read about the journey of his life's work and how keeping our medium alive is more complicated than you think.



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The annual Evo fighting game tournament is synonymous with Street Fighter, but its growing in new directions thanks to the fighting game community.

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Crowdfunding has been a boon for some prospective projects and a dead end for others. We look at a host of video games who've turned to Kickstarter, Fig, et.al. and see how they ultimately fared.

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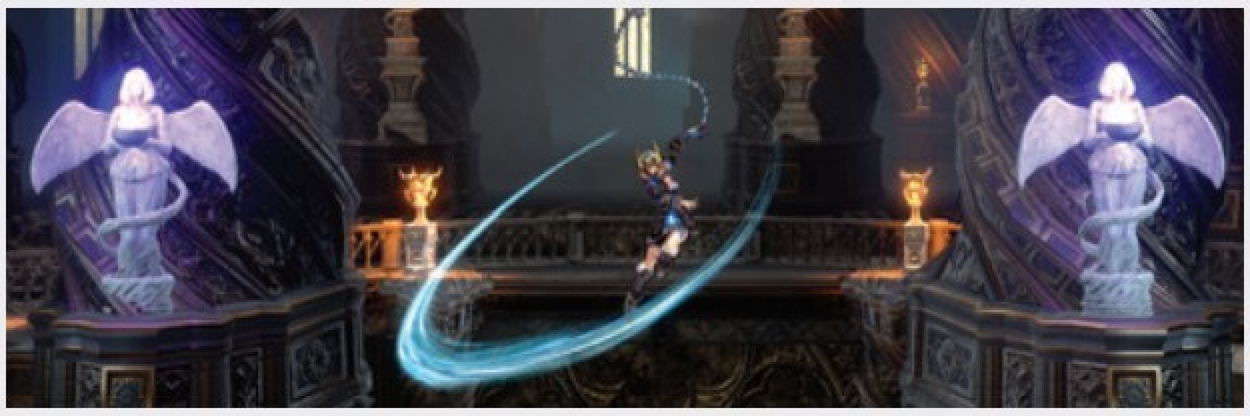

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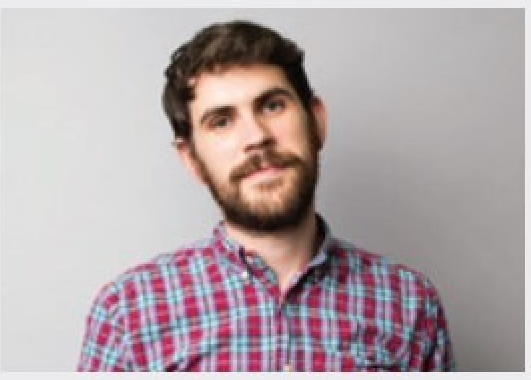

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The post-release fallout around No Man's Sky was a difficult time for Sean Murray, co-founder of developer Hello Games, but with subsequent updates the game is taking a giant leap once again. Murray talks about the experience and the next gleam in his eye.

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Babies, ladders, and urination.

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Megapixel Studio wants to resurrect what the Saturn classic shooter did best.

80 Monster Hunter World: Iceborne
Iceborne gives you plenty of reasons to revisit Monster Hunter: World. With fresh monsters and a huge new region, this hefty expansion features some of the most challenging fights and over-the-top gear yet.

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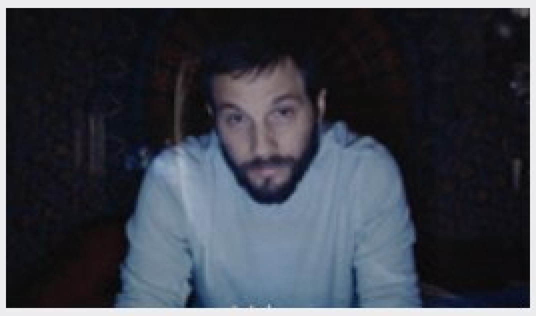

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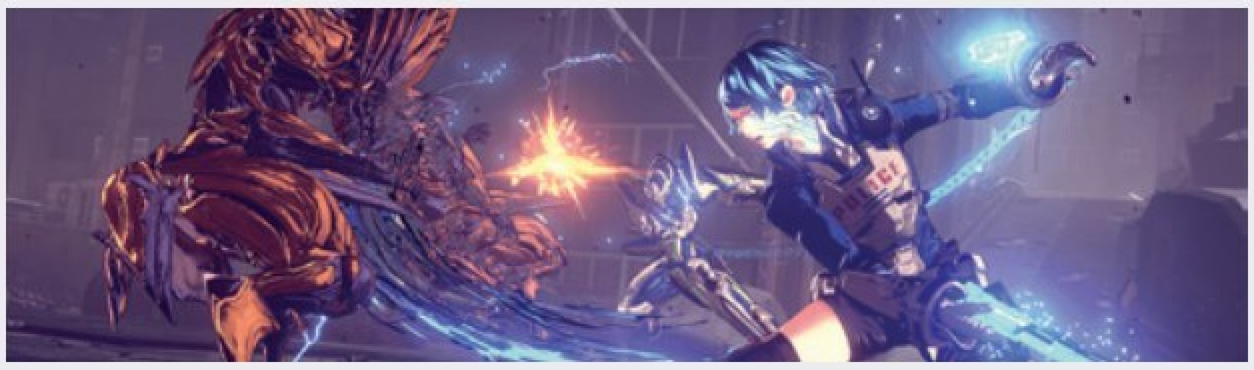
There are lots of new features – and plenty of old problems – in EA's latest pigskin title.



88 Astral Chain
This stylish action game is a Switch exclusive that proves PlatinumGames still knows how to make flashy combat and strange stories.

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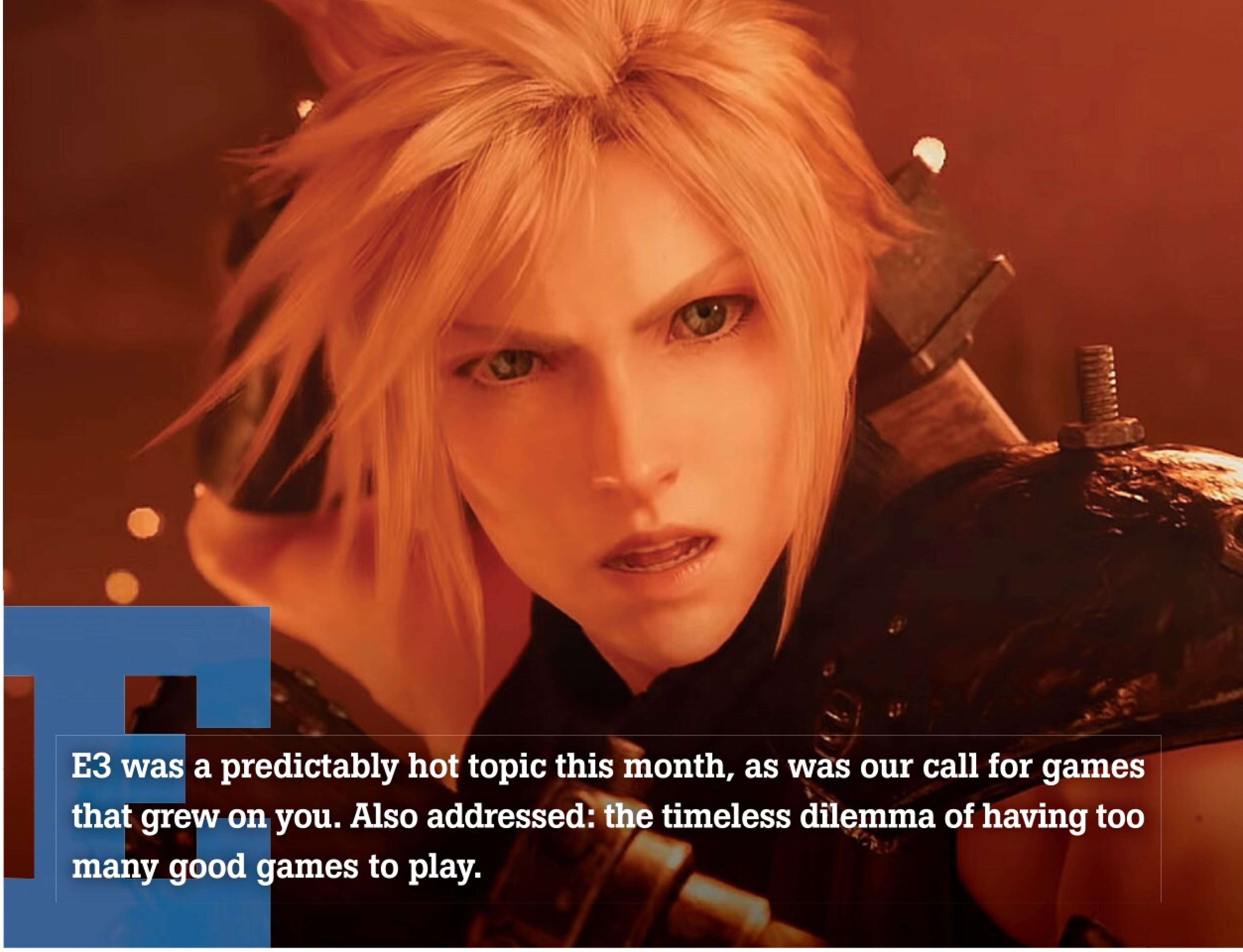


E3 was a predictably hot topic this month, as was our call for games that grew on you. Also addressed: the timeless dilemma of having too many good games to play.

A Fantasy Come True

I am still very slowly working my way through your E3 Hot 50 feature (issue 316), and just want to express how absolutely stoked I am for Final Fantasy VII Remake! Now, mind you, I was five months old when the original came out, so my only exposure to FF VII came via *Advent Children* and *On the Way to a Smile* (both of which are excellent, by the way). But still, after reading your preview, I cannot wait for March 3!

Kalie L. Faul
via email

Final Fantasy VII Remake's ambitious scope and long development cycle have elicited some justifiable skepticism from gamers over the years, including us. We certainly didn't enter E3 expecting it to land the second spot on our Hot 50 list, but the demo Square Enix gave lived up to the hype. Whether the team can consistently deliver the same quality and excitement in the final product remains to be seen, but if you loved *Advent Children*, we're guessing you won't be disappointed.

Eeny, Meeny …

I have a real problem with gaming indecision. I often find myself looking at the many games in my backlog for minutes at a time. I have such a hard time picking a game to play, that I usually just go on a storefront and buy a new game instead of choosing something I already own to play. This isn't because I don't like the games I own. Quite the opposite – I want to play them all, so I get stuck in a state of paralysis when choosing one. Do any of you ever have this problem? And if so, how do you shake it?

Grant
Ontario, Canada

Gamers often refer to their unplayed games as a "pile of shame," but there's no reason to feel that way. Gaming is meant to be fun, not an obligation, and no one has the spare time to play everything. Don't worry about progress or productivity and just pick something that sounds enjoyable in the moment. If you can't narrow things down based on a genre you're in the mood for, nursery rhymes, Magic 8-Balls, and those paper folding thingies that tell your fortune will help vanquish your indecision. Not good enough? Fine – just go play Diablo III, Grant!

Not So Keen

In your coverage of E3, you asked if anyone actually cared enough about Commander Keen to lament its move to mobile (E3 at a Glance, issue 316). Well here I am, a kid who grew up on Commander Keen in the '90s with Invasion of the Vorticons and Goodbye, Galaxy. And believe me, I'm not just lamenting, I'm OUTRAGED that Bethesda has figuratively screwed my childhood over like this. If I wanted Commander Keen back, I'd want it the way it used to be, not some money-grubbing mobile game!

Gregory Andrei Prytyka Jr.
via email

We usually admonish gamers for taking developer decisions so personally, but seeing as how you're the only Commander Keen fan we heard from and/or the only one in existence, we'll allow a little venting. On the bright side, maybe the new Keen will inspire a whole new generation of fans, whose minds will be blown when they discover the older, better games?

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Not Kidding Around

I finished reading last issue's E3 coverage and noticed you mentioned a couple of times that E3 struggled to pull in as many attendants as previous years, presumably since Sony dropped out. Should more publishers choose to skip E3 in upcoming years, I think they could boost ticket sales by opening up the convention to teenagers. I'm certain that some 13- to 17-year-olds would love to attend, and that by having a parent tag along any concerns about inappropriate content wouldn't be much of a problem. While this probably wouldn't fix all of E3's attendance problems, it surely wouldn't hurt.

Gable Coe
via email

By any chance would you happen to be one of those 13- to 17-year-olds, Gable? In all seriousness, the ESA could certainly transition E3 into more of a PAX-style, family-friendly event. It's all a matter of choosing and conveying a vision for the show to the industry. Either way, the ESA's laissez-faire approach to publishers dropping out needs to change – if they want attendees to actually have games to see, that is.

Achievement Unlocked

I can't help but think video games should offer greater incentives for players to obtain achievements and trophies, instead of just treating them like digital Boy Scout badges. For example, Microsoft could implement our Gamerscores as a pseudo-currency that could be used to earn 5-10 percent discounts on digital titles. What do you think of my idea?

Joseph Limerick
via email

That's a good idea, Joseph – so good that Microsoft has tried it before. Throughout the years, Microsoft has presented various bonuses tied to achievements, from discounts to digital goods you could earn for your avatar. Currently, Xbox players can get goodies by completing "Quests" offered in Xbox Game Pass titles. The deals aren't great, however, which is probably why you haven't heard about the initiative in the first place.

Three's A Crowd

I own an Xbox One and I have a sister and a friend that I play games with a lot. The problem is I can't find many games for three players. Most of Microsoft's console exclusives like Gears of War 4 and Forza Horizon don't support more than two players. Do you have any recommendations? Please help!

Evan Schmidt
via email

Split-screen multiplayer may be endangered, but it's not extinct. Borderlands is one of the biggest series that still supports couch co-op for more than two players, but we also heartily recommend Overcooked, Rayman Legends, Rocket League, and Minecraft. Gears 5 will also support three player split-screen, so look for our review next month!

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"I want to get Dreams, but is it worth it?"

Yes!

"Why are you so racist toward werewolves?"

What? We love werewolves! Now Khajiit, on the other hand …

"Is Darth what's-his-face really the editor? He looks like a d-bag."

Yes, and he gets that a lot.

Best Unsolicited Reader Advice:

"Build every type of game to be a lot better and smaller in download size."

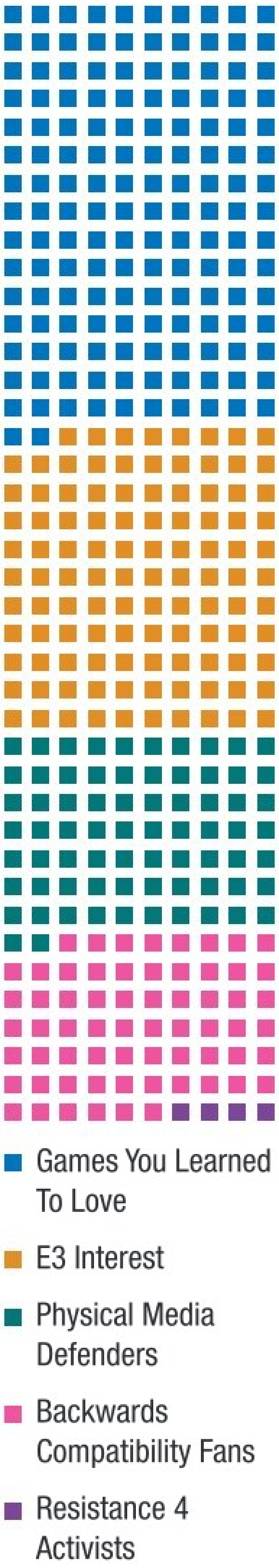
Question Of The Month:

What's the one thing you wish all developers would think about when making their games?

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) Frank Cifaldi, Kelsey Lewin, and a whole team from the Video Game History Foundation were back in the G.I. office to preserve history. Read more about it on page 10! **(Right)** It might be a few months old, but don't miss our G.I. Show chat with designers Sam Lake, Ru Weerasuriya, Swen Vincke, and Megan Starks.



Better With Time

In issue 316, we asked readers what game they initially hated, but learned to love. Give these responses a chance – they grow on you…

Sonic the Hedgehog 2 was bundled with the Sega Genesis I got for Christmas when I was 7. I was liking it fine until my first boss battle with Dr. Robotnik. He seems silly now, but to my 7-year-old brain, a mad scientist trying to run me over with his car, combined with his picture on the cover art, was terrifying. I wanted to throw the game away then and there. Somehow I powered through, and realized I just needed to jump on his head eight times, and now I think of the Sonic games as defining my entire childhood.

Sean M. Cogan

This just happened to me with Bloodborne. My brother is amazing at hard video games and talked me into playing it with him. He said we could play together, but first I had to get the Beckoning Bell. The first level crushed me. I couldn't believe how difficult it was, and I just kept getting slaughtered. I seriously hated the game, but decided to give it another go a few days later. I finally got to where I needed, and the rest is history. I fell in love with this type of game and now want to play all From Software's games. I haven't felt such accomplishment from a game in a long time.

Jeremy Amacher

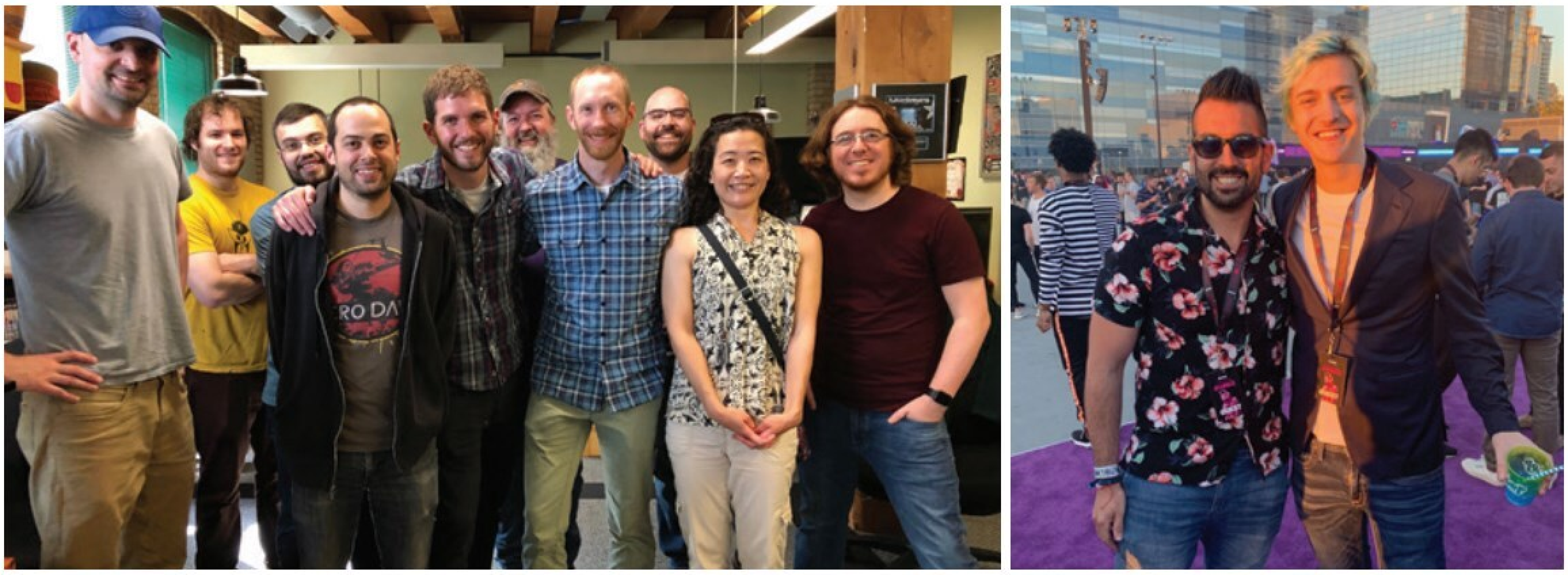
Despite being a diehard Fallout fan now, I had a hard time getting into Fallout 3. Finishing the vault, venturing outside, and completing the trek to Megaton took a long time. By the time I started receiving a multitude of side quests, I was overwhelmed, especially having never played this type of game. A few months later, I picked it up again and pressed on. Who'd have thought that this elaborate (albeit tedious) adventure would end up being one of my favorite games of all-time?

Kenny Tatum

I'm not used to tough games, and initially had a love/hate relationship with Hollow Knight. I kept deleting the game, then would redownload it, determined to not let a mere video game about a bug beat me. I'm so glad I did because I ended up obsessed with it. The music is beautiful, I love the lore, and collecting all the charms was actually fun (though Deepnest can burn in a fire). I overcame its toughness and managed to beat it, and now it's one of my favorite video games.

Stacy Warner

Correction: In issue 317 we mistakenly wrote that Chronos was a launch title for Oculus Quest in our preview for Remnant: From the Ashes. Chronos was a launch title for Oculus Rift.



(Left) Fans don't come finer than Michelle and Chad Gargrave, who stopped by the G.I. office for dinner and a tour after making a big donation to our Extra Life marathon. Thanks for your support, guys! **(Right)** Despite his online handle, mega-popular streamer Tyler "Ninja" Blevins couldn't sneak his way out of a Brian Shea snapshot.

WINNER

1 Sarah Price

We can all admit that Yoshi is the best thing about the Super Mario franchise, right?

2 Victor John, Age 10

Just once we wish Tails would drop Sonic in the nearest pit and start living his own life.

3 Abby Janke

You heard us, Rosalina!

4 Jacob Gronka

We like the Starry Night crossover Jacob is going for, but we're not sure about Pikachu's new moustache …

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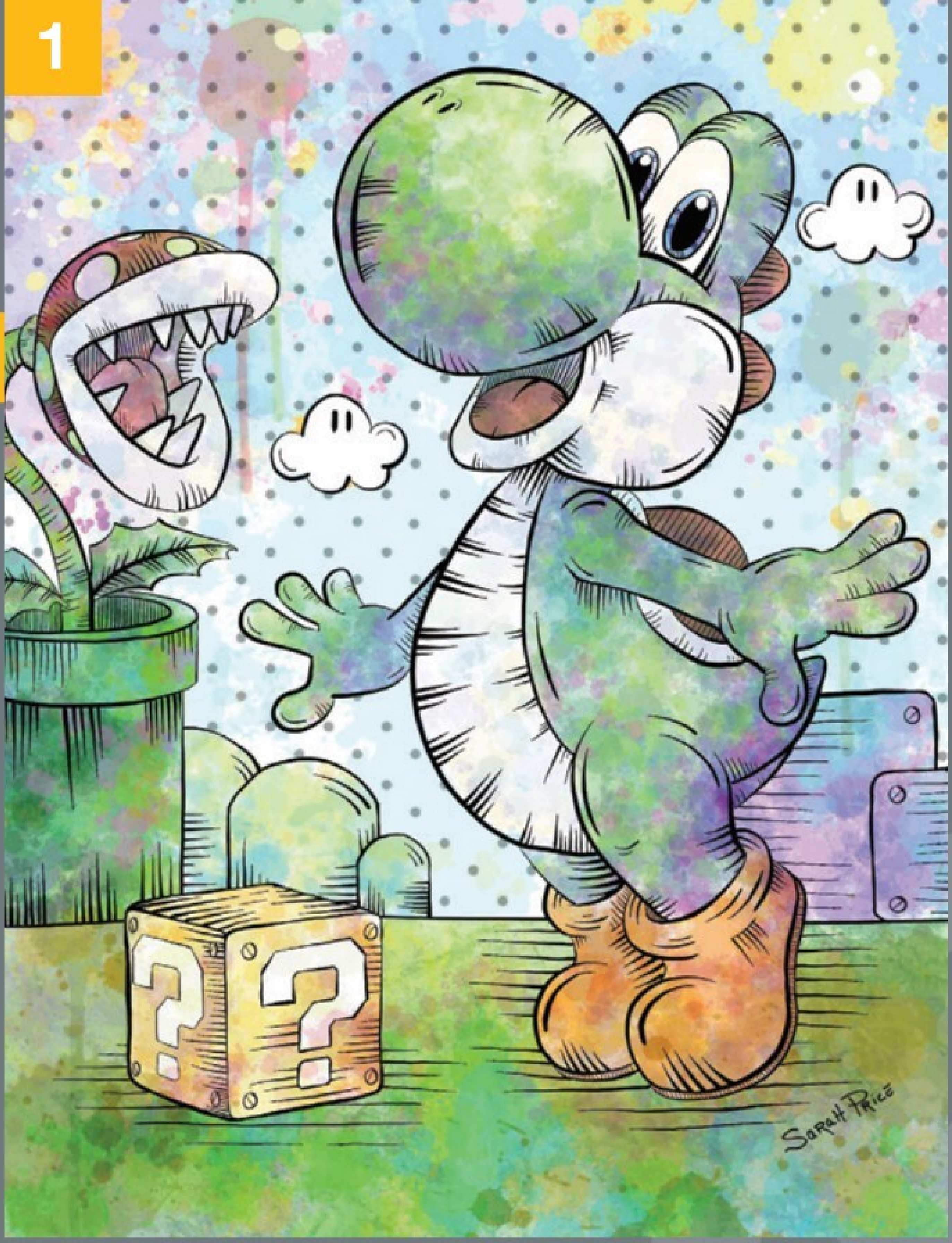

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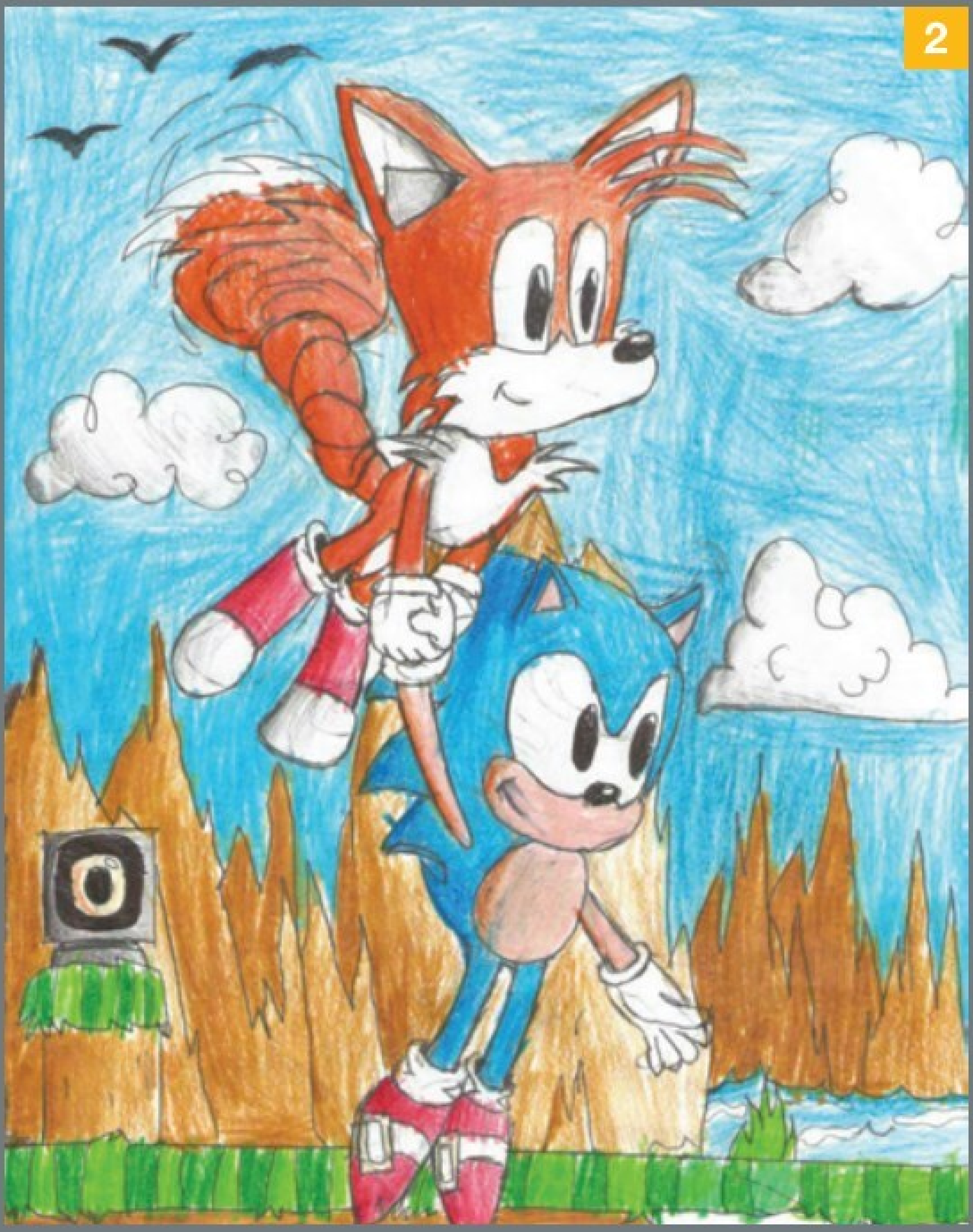

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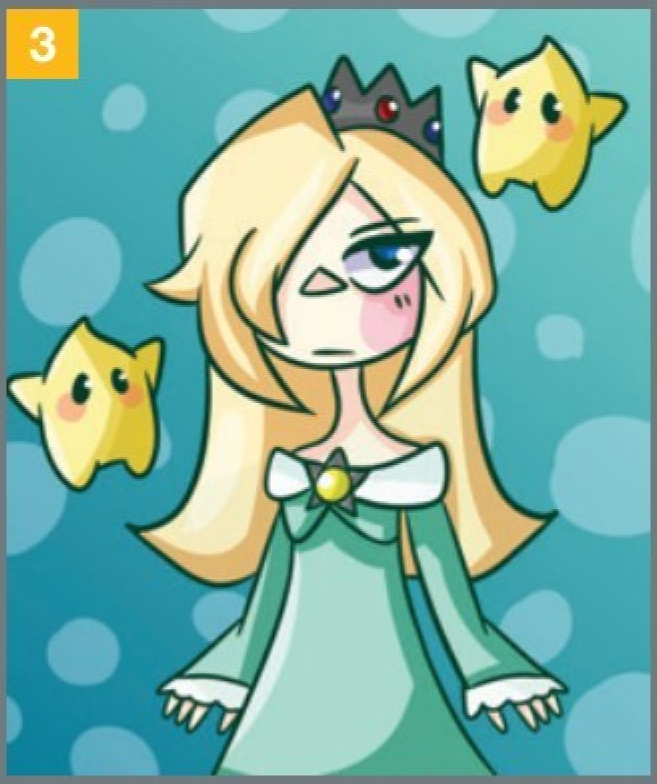

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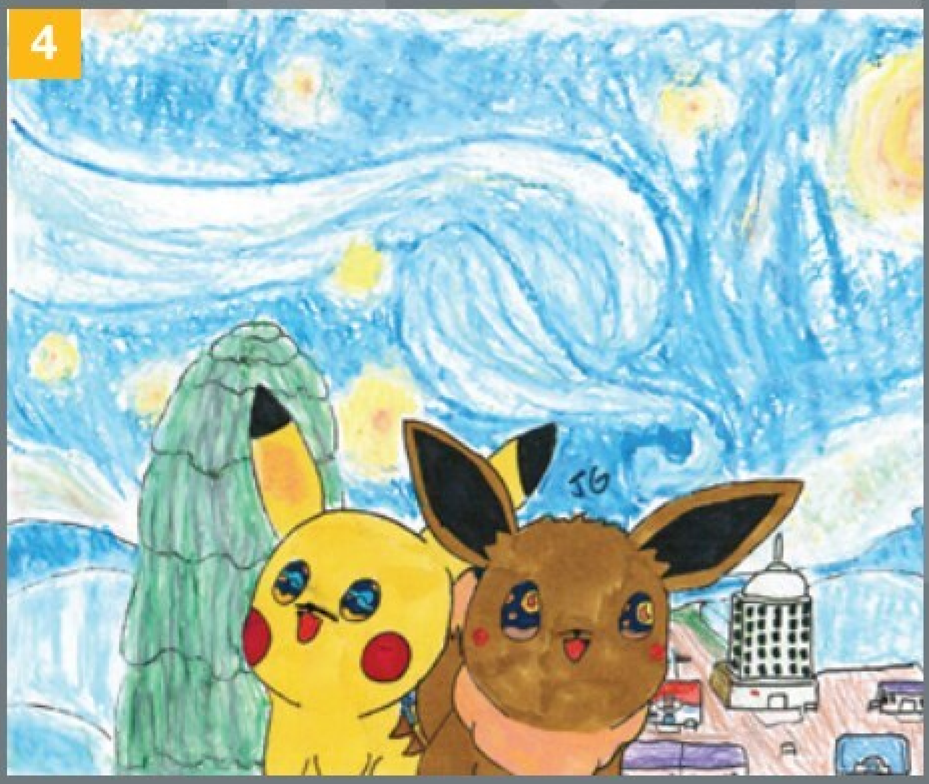

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EVOLUTION
CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES

(Left) Suriel spent most of his time at Evo practicing his Weekend At Bernie's routine with the show's co-founders Tom and Tony Cannon. **(Right)** Suriel also caught up with Riot Games lead designer Seth Killian.

KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE

Frank Cifaldi and his Video Game History Foundation are working to preserve and share our hobby's wonderfully weird history

by Jeff Cork

In 2008, a fire ravaged through a backlot in Universal City, California. Thousands of irreplaceable master recordings were destroyed in the blaze, the scale of which we're only learning about today. According to *The New York Times*, recordings from the 1940s through the 2000s were affected, including artists as diverse as The Who, Tom Petty, The Damned, Buddy Holly, Primus, and more. That part of music history – including countless unreleased and unheard tracks – has now been scattered to the winds.

That kind of story is the thing that keeps historians and preservationists up at night. What could have been done to prevent such a tragedy? In the gaming world, efforts to officially collect and safeguard history are a relatively recent phenomenon. To be blunt, the game industry isn't organized or centralized enough to have a singular event like the Universal fire. Instead, we lose history in tiny flashes every time a dev tosses out an unwanted ZIP drive from a project, clears out an old storage locker, or recycles piles of their old design notes.

Frank Cifaldi is one of several people who has devoted his life to preserving our gaming heritage. His organization, the Video Game History Foundation, is working to give researchers and academics access to source code, prerelease game information, and other historical artifacts. Thanks to his organization, the public can learn about how the Genesis version of Aladdin was built (and look at unused sprites), explore the unreleased NES version of SimCity, and check out a flyer for an abandoned Nintendo game called "Donkey Kong's Fun with Music."

But first, breakfast.

Cifaldi has been in Minneapolis for more than a month now, away from his home base in the Bay Area. It's hard not to walk away from a conversation with him and not feel energized. He's passionate and driven, and also incredibly approachable. He's now been here long enough to be considered a temporary Minnesota resident, he notes. Perhaps more importantly, he's been here long enough to master the art of producing exactly one quarter of a waffle in his hotel's self-service breakfast area. If you've ever been half awake in motel lobby and struggled with those contraptions, you know that respect is owed.

Cifaldi is in town to take on what he says is the organization's biggest task yet: cataloging and preserving a section of the *Game Informer*'s archives. A small army of out-of-town volunteers has been hard at work scanning flyers, sorting and organizing boxes of unmarked CD-ROMS, and ripping discs of promotional images and press materials. It's a huge task, considering how much we've collected over the decades, and it's compounded by the fact that we haven't saved it with usability in mind.

Still, every time I talk to Frank he's happy to explain what they're up to and share the coolest or strangest new find. Perhaps it's an unreleased Saturn port of an old sports game or screenshots for Symphony of the Night on the Game.com. Or maybe it's an inflatable lemming stuffed into a box. Regardless of a discovery's historical significance, it's clear that Frank is excited by the raw potential of all of this. He's working on a tight timeline, which means that he doesn't take long to sit still, but I did manage to corner him for several hours to learn more about his past and how he ended up getting into this line of work in the first place.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

Frank may be professionally focused on the past, but he's refreshingly unsentimental about his own history. He was born in Las Vegas, Nevada, in 1982 to Italian parents. They had an Atari in the house when he was small, but he shrugs off any notions of a singular gaming origin story. "I was a kid in the '80s, and Nintendo came out. And like all the other kids, I played Nintendo," he says. "For me, it was a toy that I had as a kid."

He took a break from the hobby in the mid-'90s after getting into girls and music. He can thank grandma for pulling him back in when he was in high school. She was a bingo player, and she used her winnings at one point to buy him a PC – something his mom wasn't thrilled to have into the house. From there, his world opened up, in no small part thanks to the early days of the Internet. This was around the time of file-sharing and Napster, when people had a vague idea of what was and wasn't legal but weren't overly concerned with the consequences.

"I think that's when I actually started figuring out who I was, but also got into video games at the same time," he recalls. "And that was mostly just from looking around for stuff about the games I used to play, which led a personal interest in discovering emulation and falling in love with the concept of being able to access all of these ancient-ass games. Well, they felt really old, then, even though we're talking about games from like, five years [earlier]. For some reason, they felt like they felt ancient."

Frank says he was thrilled with the idea of being able to play games he grew up with, and also being able to check out games he'd only read about in *Nintendo Power*. Better still, he was

Frank Cifaldi walks editor-in-chief Andy McNamara through some of what he's done with our magazine archives

Before optical media was prevalent, unreleased games were distributed via EPROMs

able to play games that had only come out in Japan and had a strange aura of mystique around them. "It's like, 'Wow, these are games I'm not supposed to play,'" he says. As fun as playing the games was, his natural curiosity led him to think more deeply about what he was experiencing.

"It just led me down this path of being really fascinated by where these files come from, like, how did they get there?" he says. "How do they get from a cartridge to the Internet to my computer? And I don't think the word "preservation" came into play until years later, but you know, for me, it was discovering that there were organized groups that really cared about this stuff."

These online communities were coming together to document lists of released games for various platforms, which Frank found irresistible. He decided that he was going to focus on the NES. "I think what probably inspired me was the fact that there was a list of any games that you couldn't get on the Internet yet," he says. "There was like a wanted list. And it wasn't that big."

That enthusiasm turned to frustration, as he saw interesting, obscure titles getting dumped online without any kind of context or fanfare. He put together a web site where he set out to address that issue as he saw it. "What I tried to do was just take a day to play through it, and maybe not review it, but just have something to say about it," he says. "Like, show screenshots. Just to do something, to be like, 'Hey, this is f---ing cool. We just did magic. We just magicked a game cartridge and put it on the Internet. This is still really exciting! Let's look at this game for a minute.'"

There was always friction between collectors and the people who wanted to share games online, and eventually things bubbled over for Cifaldi. "The next evolution for me was anger. Being angry at the gall of people having these like, goblin hoards of games that don't belong to them that they are controlling," he says. "Like, the biggest collector back then was at a video game magazine that had been around back then and was basically just pilfering their archives. But, you know, I was very angry at the thought of a person being a gatekeeper for work that they nothing to do with."

Rather than spending his energy fuming impotently about the issue, Cifaldi decided to do something with that emotion. He started his site *Lost Levels*, which documented the histories behind unreleased games. "The idea behind *Lost Levels* was, hey, just because a game didn't come out, that doesn't mean that it shouldn't have or that it's not worth examining," he says. He began pooling his money with other like-minded players and worked to outbid other collectors on eBay to rescue old games. "That's how we saw it, anyway."

Frank was working a day job at the time, doing clerical work at a mental-health clinic and taking college classes at night. He launched *Lost Levels* at the Classic Gaming Expo at 2003, where he had a booth. "I dressed like a pirate," he says, adding that he's not sure exactly what he was trying to say with that costume choice.

A PROFESSIONAL PATH

Frank says his first professional interview was with Neil Gaiman, who he cornered at a Comic-Con. There, he resisted the urge to fanboy out about *Sandman* and comics, and instead Cifaldi interviewed him about the old PC games Gaiman had written. His work on *Lost Levels* led to other opportunities, as editors saw the potential in a writer with a passion for old games. Over the next few years, Cifaldi worked at several other outlets, including *Nintendo Official Magazine UK*, *Gamasutra*, and *1UP*.

Frank then moved to Atlanta to take a job at *GameTap*, an online video game service setup by Turner Broadcasting. "You know how we always talk about 'The Netflix for games?'" Frank says. "Yeah, we already tried that." *GameTap* gave subscribers streaming access

to more than 1,000 games for $10 a month. Cifaldi was the editorial director of the game client, where he wrote the little house ads to guide players on what to play.

Eventually, he got a job at Digital Eclipse, where he helped to produce games and also curated content for more historically based titles such as the Mega Man Legacy Collection, the Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection, and the SNK 40th Anniversary Collection.

"There needs to be something like a Criterion Collection for games," Frank says. "And I don't think we're there yet. Yeah. But we need to start making the kinds of products that we want to see, you know, that that are full of context."

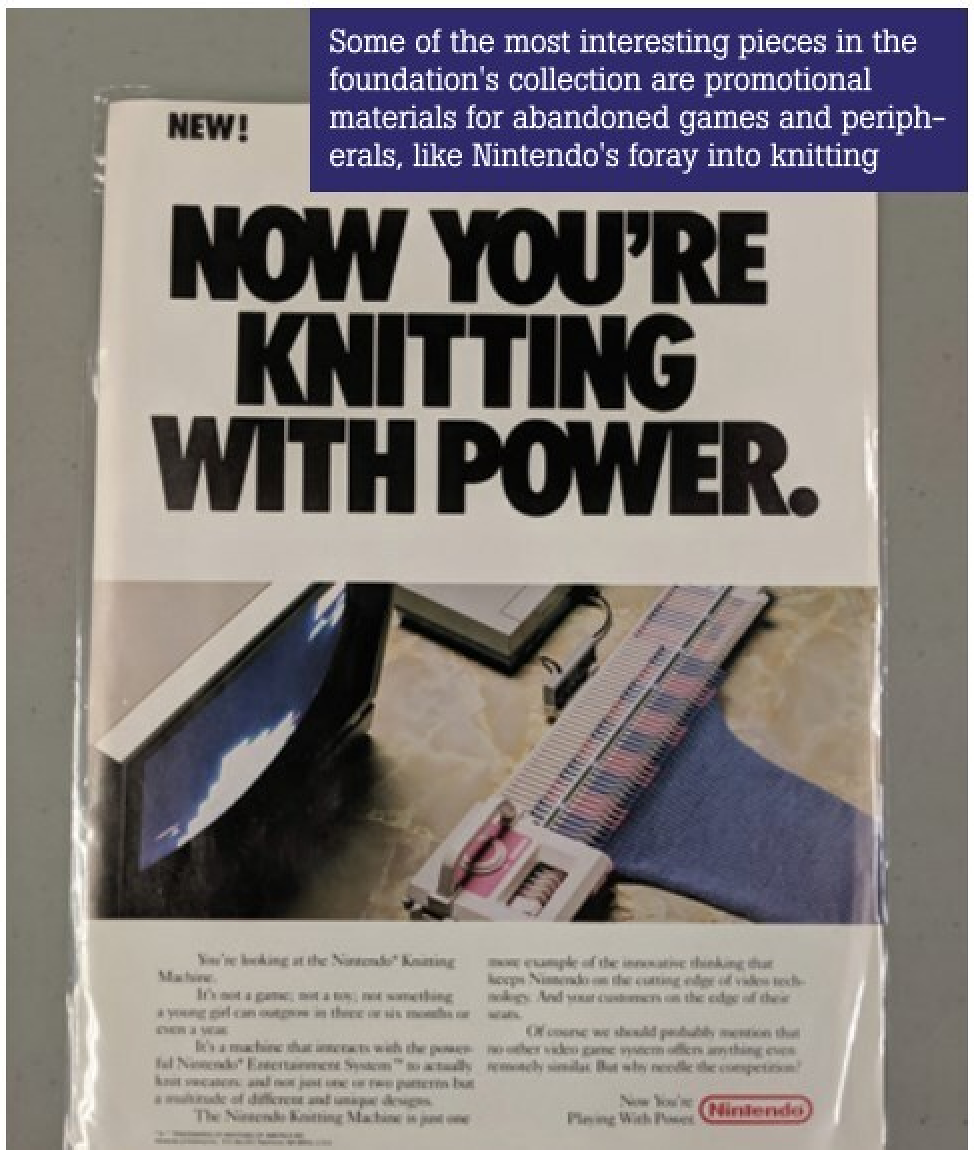
With the Street Fighter collection, for example, he and collaborator Brandon Sheffield created a timeline of the series that included more than 1,000 pieces of art – more than half of which hadn't been released online before, including images of a prototype version of Blanka that was a black guy in chains. He added a boss-rush mode to Mega Man for its Anniversary Collection, and modified Tailspin to let players start out with fully powered-up characters from the start.

Frank says he's probably proudest of the SNK collection, which includes tool-assisted playback of each of the games being played that players can seize control of at any moment. Since the SNK collection is filled with obscurities, there's a particular emphasis on education and historical context. Frank says he's not as interested in mastering these old games like it's suddenly 1980 again. Instead, he wants to give players insight as to what these games were and how they fit into the larger arcade context at the time of their release.

It's easy to look back at someone's life with the benefit of hindsight and pinpoint a trajectory, but it's hard not to see a preservationist throughline that threads it all. I'm not alone in seeing it. "I think my entire career has been an excuse to do this," Franks says.

These banks of CD rippers automate the process of archiving old press materials – something that would be extraordinarily slow if done manually

The Video Game History Foundation's physical space includes complete runs of a wide array of classic magazine


Some of the most interesting pieces in the foundation's collection are promotional materials for abandoned games and peripherals, like Nintendo's foray into knitting

NEW!

NOW YOU'RE KNITTING WITH POWER.

You're looking at the Nintendo® Knitting Machine.

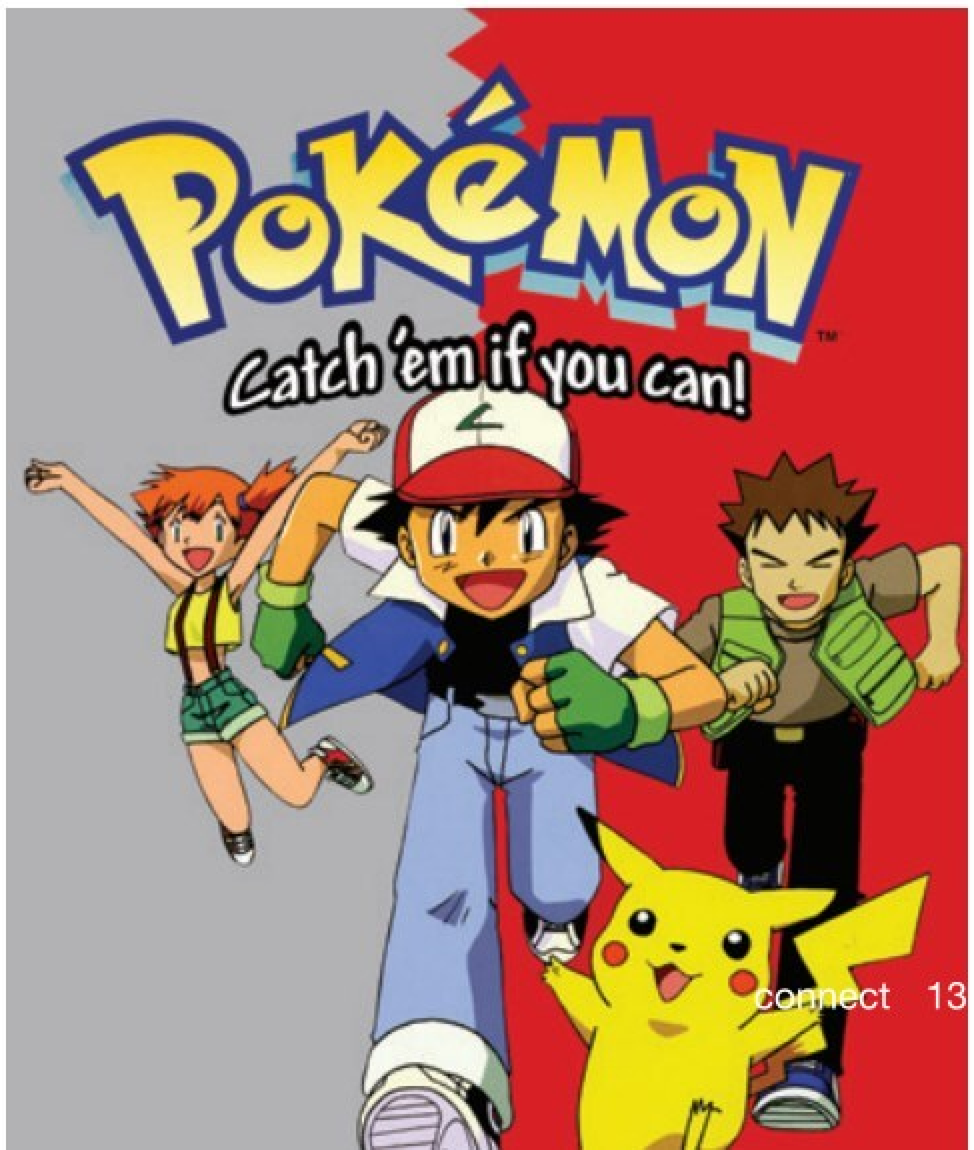
It's not a game; not a toy; not something a young girl can outgrow in three or six months or even a year.

It's a machine that interacts with the powerful Nintendo® Entertainment System™ to actually knit sweaters; and not just one or two patterns but a multitude of different and unique designs.

The Nintendo Knitting Machine is just one more example of the innovative thinking that keeps Nintendo on the cutting edge of video technology. And your customers on the edge of their seats.

Of course we should probably mention that no other video game system offers anything even remotely similar. But why needle the competition?

Now You're
Playing With Power. Nintendo


Pokémon
Catch 'em if you can!

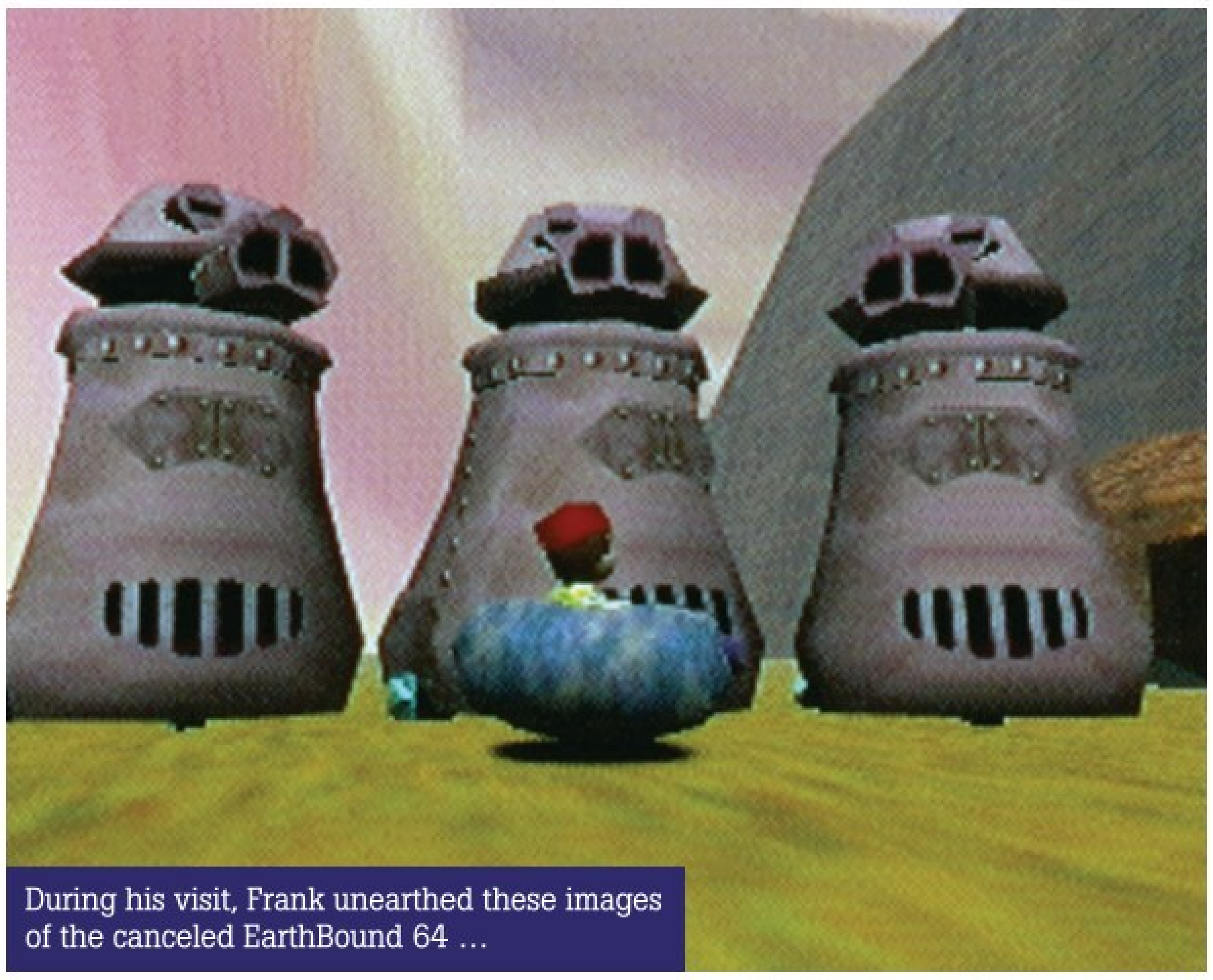
LAYING OUT THE PIECES

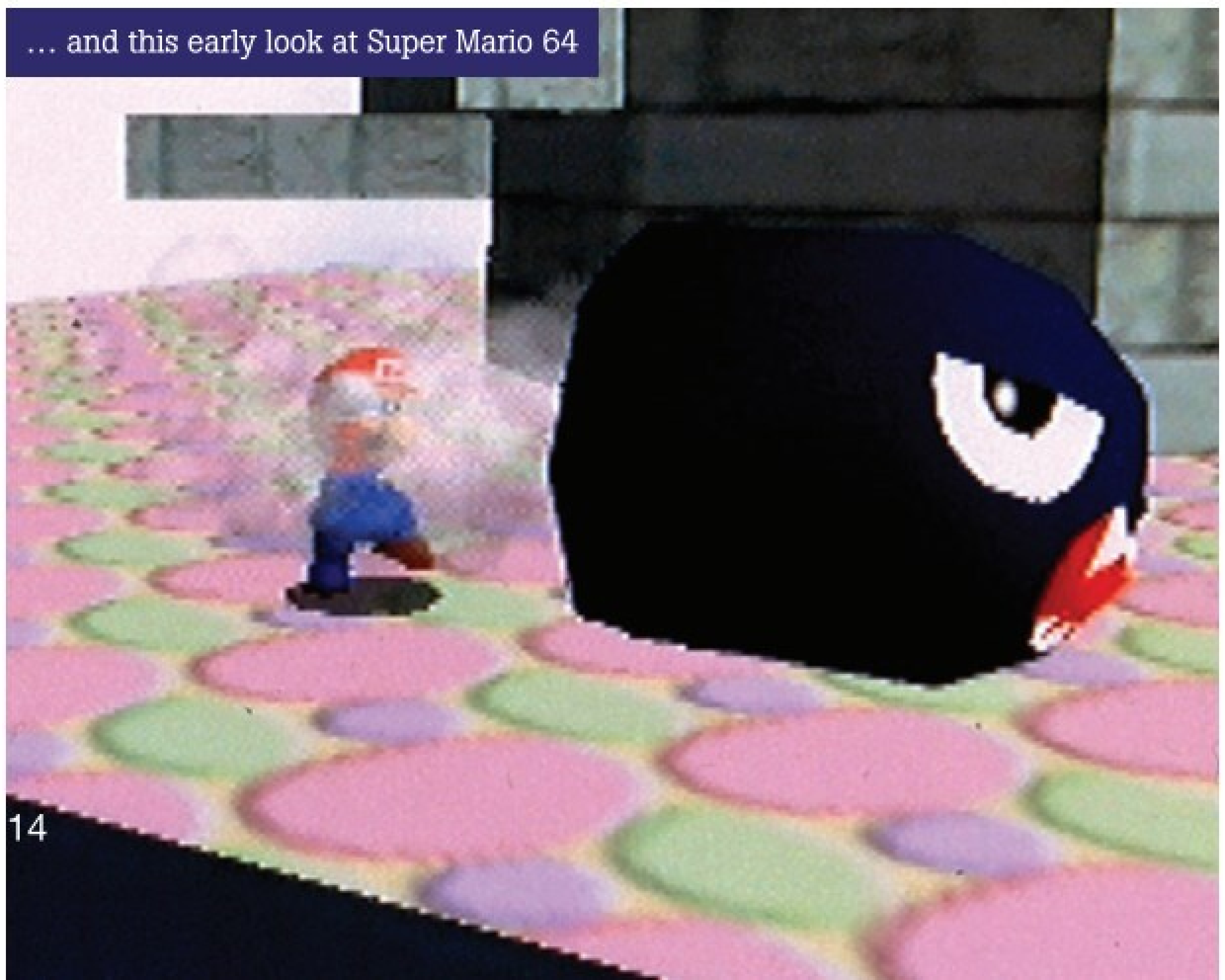
Back in our offices, it's hard not to be impressed with what Frank and his team have assembled. They've commandeered several offices in our administrative floor and converted them into a scrappy data-processing center. After sorting CD-ROMS of press materials – not retail product, to be clear – volunteers feed stacks of the discs into banks of automated machines, which then rip and process the info before snapping an image of the disc itself with a webcam. It's thanks in no small part to the efforts of the Foundation's technical director, Travis Brown, a volunteer from Atlanta whose day job is as a programmer at Twitch.tv.

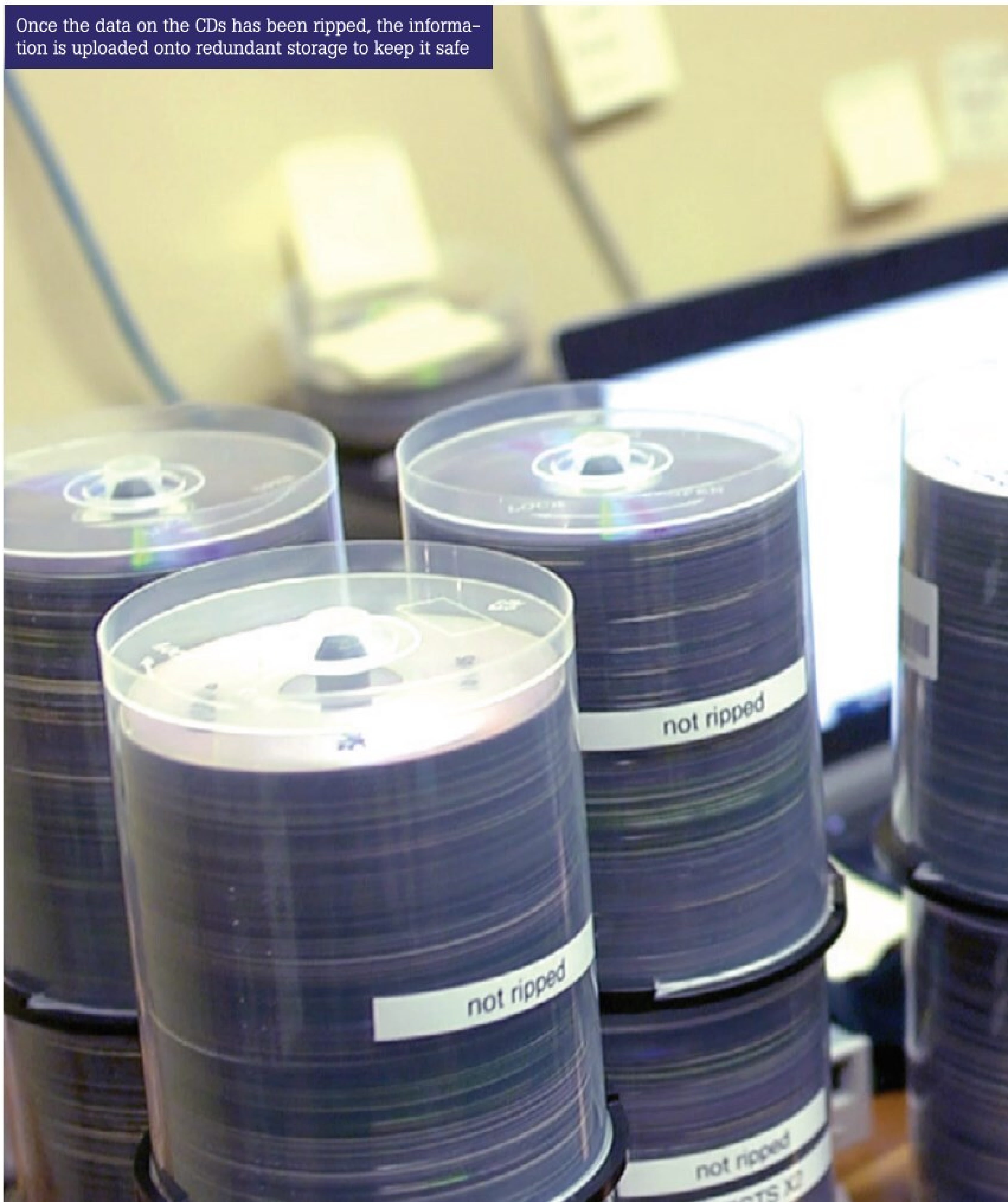
During a scouting visit a few years ago, Cifaldi dug into a file cabinet of old flyers and promotional material that hadn't been opened since 2001 (we may have lost the key). Once the lock was drilled, he pulled out a treasure trove of ephemera that in all likelihood would have otherwise been thrown out. Today, foundation co-director Kelsey Lewin is set up in a conference room, where she preps the paperwork for scanning. Lewin co-owns the retro gaming store Pink Gorilla in Seattle, which recently made headlines for buying a copy of the rare Nintendo World Championships 1990 cartridge from a seller – after informing him of its fair market value of about $15-20,000. Removing staples and organizing flyers from Majesco's old E3 lineup may not be as stimulating, but it's still important work.

Before the team can start scanning in flyers and other documents, they have to sort through the materials and see what they have

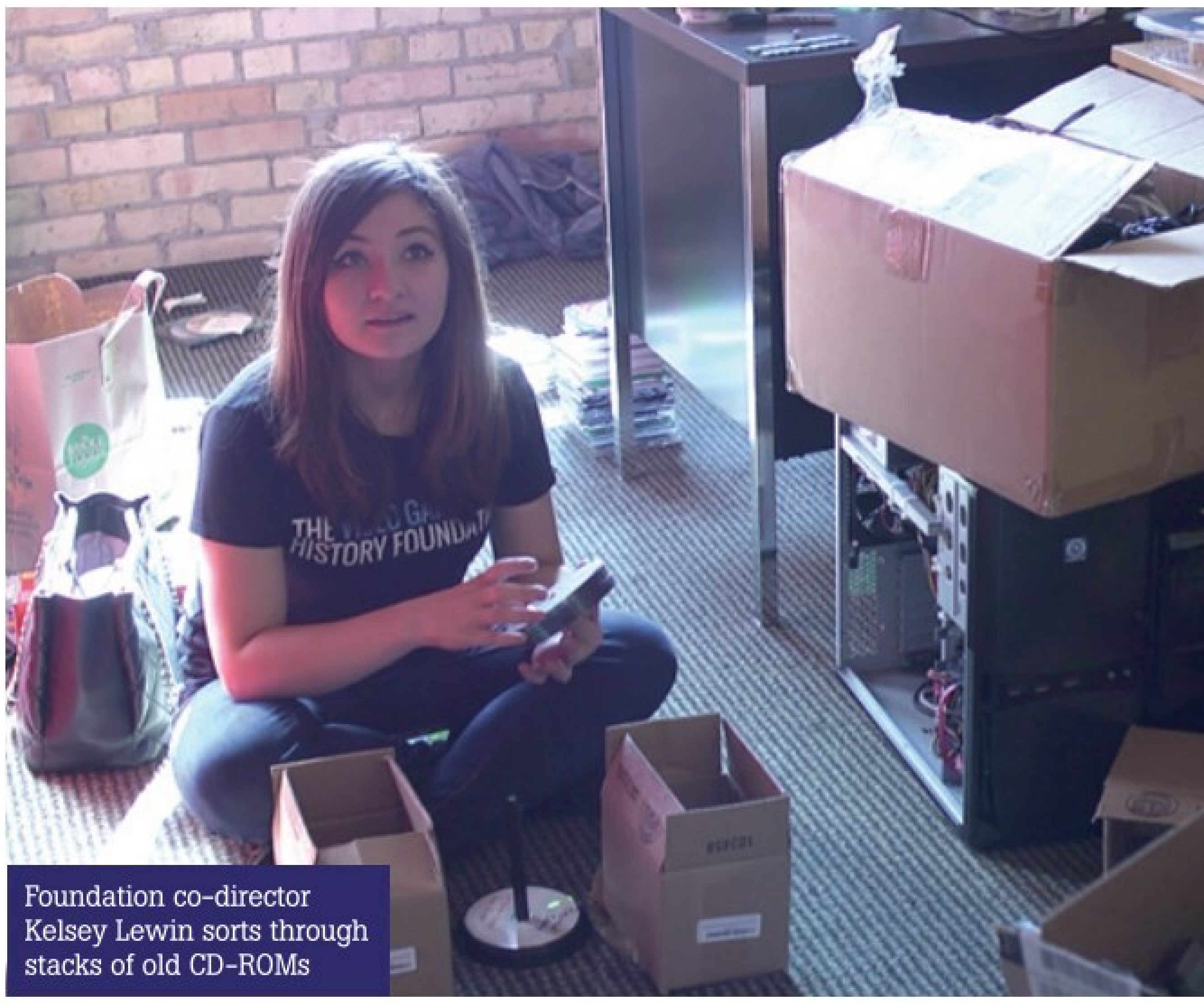
There's a sense that the team is racing against time, in more ways than one. Frank and his team are only in our offices for about a month, and they have a tremendous amount of work to go through – with no real chance of completing it all. Meanwhile, these old optical discs are slowly breaking down and losing data, along with the history that was burned onto their surfaces. CDs aren't designed to last forever, but they're fairly hardy if they're stored well. CD-ROMs are much more vulnerable to data rot as they break down, since they were seen as a cheap and easy way to move large chunks of data easily. In many cases, the press kits we got from publishers at shows were burned onto the cheapest possible discs as an understandable way to save money. That's why these are a particular focus of this visit.


During his visit, Frank unearthed these images of the canceled EarthBound 64 …


… and this early look at Super Mario 64


Once the data on the CDs has been ripped, the information is uploaded onto redundant storage to keep it safe

Andy and Frank look at some old slides, which is how we used to get images from companies for print layouts


Foundation co-director Kelsey Lewin sorts through stacks of old CD-ROMs

“Digital preservation and digital research are given a layered approach, like your priority zero is getting whatever data there is off of sensitive formats,” Frank says. “So getting it into a place where, you know, we have images that can now live in redundant storage in the cloud, where it’s safe.”

The damage is already happening here. Frank says that as his team worked through our collection, they kept a so-called graveyard pile where the data has rotted away. “We already lost some of your history to age,” he says. “It’s gone now, and the rest are ticking bombs.”

What’s the point of all of this? Unlike the Strong National Museum of Play or the National Videogame Museum, the Video Game History Foundation isn’t, well, a museum. Its collection has and will benefit people who enjoy reading about video games and learning some of the strange stories behind their creation and marketing, but that’s not its primary focus. Instead, these materials will eventually be catalogued and made available to researchers, writers, and historians who make an appointment to view the Foundation’s physical space in Emoryville, California. The Foundation is also working to give researchers access to source code, which is a challenge considering how secretive the industry is about the raw materials that make up a game.

“There’s a possibility that you’ll never know why it matters,” Frank says. He imagines a situation where someone might notice that Claire Redfield’s outfit is different in a series of prerelease screens versus the Resident Evil’s retail version. “And that’s, you know, the purpose of the foundation. You know, people think we’re a museum all the time. And obviously, we’re a nonprofit that just makes sure that historians have the tools that they need to tell the story of video.”

Cifaldi’s idea of academics and historians is generous, too, extending to YouTubers and amateur journalists – a notion that dovetails into his early, populist roots. “I don’t want people to struggle to research video games,” he says. “I want those barriers to come down. I want people to be able to access primary source material, and study this stuff in a way that you can’t just playing the game or, you know, just reading coverage or whatever. And, and I want people to just bring that history alive until they tell interesting stories. … What we’re doing is for people like Kelsey, who make YouTube historical retrospective videos, who struggle their asses off to research obscure topics, because there’s not a place to go.”

Cifaldi has a natural gift for being able to suss out interesting stories and getting people to cooperate. For instance, he heard about an oddball entry in the Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego series based, of all things, on North Dakota, and managed to not only track down the people involved in its development but to retrieve a fully working version of the game. (He calls it the hardest one in the series, by far, thanks in no small part to the fact that North Dakotan history and geography hasn’t exactly bubbled into pop-culture consciousness.) Not everyone can talk a film crew into helping out with the logistics, however, which is why the Foundation’s work is beneficial. Having a central repository makes doing research much easier, when visitors are able to bounce between ideas when inspiration strikes.

“You don’t know what the story is until you start connecting the dots between all these things,” Frank says, grinning. “You’re like, ‘Oh, s---, wait, you know, this tiny image in this magazine? I know what that is. Because in this other thing, this guy said this, and wait a minute…’” The greatest feeling in the world is piecing that stuff together and making something new. You know, I think I get the same joy out of that then like, a musician gets, you know what I mean? To me, that’s my art.”

How To Help

The Video Game History Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and you can learn more about its mission and how to contribute at www.gamehistory.org. There, you can also read a wide array of features about topics as diverse as video game violence (circa 1976), the history of print ads, and what lessons Nintendo learned from its abandoned NES version of SimCity.

VICTO
ARSLAN
Arslan Ash

photo: Stephanie Lindgren

FIGHTING UPWARDS

Evo 2019 shows us how fighting-game communities have grown beyond Street Fighter

Every year during the first weekend of August, thousands of fighting game fans gather under one roof. At the Mandalay Bay hotel, they compete in one (or several) games at the Evolution Championship Series (Evo for short), the world's largest open-bracket fighting-game tournament. They come from many different backgrounds; Students, cooks, and lawyers join streamers, full-time players, and commentators on the stage floor. New Super Smash Bros. players chill with longtime arcade-era nuts who spend the weekend playing years-old classics. They may come from different backgrounds, but any of them could take home first place in their game of choice, provided they're dedicated, skilled, and rested enough to make it through their daunting bracket.

The term "FGC" stands for fighting game community, but it's really shorthand for a number of disparate communities, each held together by a combination of regionality, discipline, or affection for a game. At this year's Evo, however, it's clear all of these groups are slowly converging with each other, giving rise to a community whose passion grows every year, even as the tides for individual games wax and wane.

by Suriel Vazquez

GIVING UP THE BELT

Street Fighter has traditionally been the main event at Evo, as the tournament's roots are as a West Coast major for the game. This year was different. Rather than close out the show, the Street Fighter V (SF V) finals ran around 1 p.m. Sunday on Mandalay's center stage, followed by the finals for Tekken 7 and Super Smash Bros. Ultimate.

There could be practical reasons for the schedule change. "I think that's a combination of them recognizing they have an international audience," says Stephen "Sajam" Lyon, who's been heavily involved with SF V's competitive scene as a commentator. "There was a pivot moment where [Capcom] started to have their finals always be at 1 p.m.," he says. Capcom declined to comment on their tournament scheduling for this story, but the finals for SF V events at other majors like Combo Breaker and Community Effort Orlando took place around that time frame, rather than late in the evening.

But for many, the change is yet another sign of SF V's decline. In 2016, its first year at Evo, it had 5,102 entrants, making it by far the biggest event in Evo history (a record it still holds). This year, SF V drew 1,929 entrants, putting it behind Super Smash Bros. Ultimate's 3,492-player debut and just barely edging out Tekken 7's 1,885 entrants.

Street Fighter V exists in the shadow of Street Fighter IV (SF IV), a game widely credited with causing an explosion of interest in fighting games. In its prime, SF IV was the fighting game, and its tournament held the most prestige at just about every event. While SF V drew enormous crowds in its first year at Evo, the shine quickly faded, and the title lost nearly half its entrants the following year, clocking in at only 2,625 players. By contrast, SF IV built up its competitive audience from 1,040 entrants in 2009 to 2,236 in 2015, the last year before SF V took the reins.

Attendance at a single tournament isn't the only reason people are overall less excited for Street Fighter. SF V suffered from a disastrous launch, plagued by a lack of single-player content and a spotty-at-best launch-week online experience. "I think basically everything outside of the two characters fighting each other didn't work that well," Lyon says. "When the game came out, all of us were sort of like, 'Well, this is a fun fighting game, but like what the hell happened with everything else, you know?'" While the game's overall trajectory since then has shakily trended upwards, Street Fighter is not the centerpiece of the fighting game scene it once was, and it hasn't been able to completely shake the negative perception caused by its rough launch.

Despite those setbacks, SF V is still in a strong position. Second place at the world's largest fighting game tournament is still a great feat, and this year's competition has been downright stellar to watch. "We're at that point where you really start to see the experts and the specialists shine," Lyon says. "And that's where I think games get to be the most interesting to watch." The finals also had several strong personalities to root for, including a longtime veteran of the scene named Masato "Bonchan" Takahashi. Takahashi had gone without top honors in Street Fighter at Evo but was widely recognized as one of its best players, and after a months-long hot streak recently, he finally claimed his championship spot.

photo: Carlton Beener

David "UltraDavid" Graham and Ryan "Ketchup" Neal commentate the Mortal Kombat 11 tournament

A decline in Street Fighter's status would be cause for concern during the era of SF IV. But today, with overall attendance at Evo and other tournaments up year-over-year, it's possible SF V's loss has been the fighting scene's gain. "Because [SF V] was a bit of a letdown for a lot of people, it's allowed a lot of the other cool fighting games that are coming out to shine a bit more, because people were looking for something else to play," Lyon says. "I think when you look at the Evo numbers and the spread of it, and you see how many games are over 1,000 entrants ... it is kind of a consequence of people not liking Street Fighter V as much."

AN ELECTRIC SECOND WIND

As SF V's numbers declined at Evo and other tournaments, Tekken 7's have only risen. Whether you hung out on the floor, in hotel room meetups playing whatever was on hand, or toured Vegas with like-minded friends, you'd eventually have a chat with someone about Tekken 7.

It's hard to overstate how meteoric Tekken 7's rise has been. "At Evo, the Tekken franchise has always been a secondary – or even fifth-ary – game to Street Fighter, Marvel, and everything else," says Reepal "Rip" Parbhoo, a longtime Tekken competitor and commentator. As SF IV dominated the fighting game scene, Tekken contemporaries like Tekken 6 and Tag Tournament 2 were regularly featured but didn't draw nearly the same crowds.

That all changed with Tekken 7. Its first official tournament at Evo was in 2015, two years before it officially launched stateside (which, Parbhoo admits, made it hard for local players to compete). Since then, as developer Bandai Namco refined the game for its Western release (balancing and adding characters), Tekken 7 tournaments have only grown, just as they did for SF IV during its lifespan.

The reasons for this surge are many, according to Parbhoo. As SF V completely rebuilt many of its systems and worked through a DLC season of nothing but new characters, Tekken 7 refined its established formula rather than totally upending it. Bandai Namco correctly anticipated what fans wanted: the return of classic Tekken characters, regular balance updates, and high-profile crossover characters like Noctis from Final Fantasy XV and Negan from The Walking Dead.

And for newer players, Tekken 7 is a fantastic game to watch; matches regularly zoom in and slow down as two attacks are about to collide, upping the tension for both players and spectators. At the show, some of the most excited talk about Tekken 7

Eric "Esam" Lew

photo: Carlton Beener

came from people from other scenes. Eric “ESAM” Lew, a high-level Super Smash Bros. Ultimate player, doesn’t play Tekken 7 but loves watching it, something he attributes to how each of the game’s moves are slower and display more realistic follow-through. “You can see them; it looks like someone’s doing the low punch and that’s it,” he says. “Watching it, you’re like, ‘Oh, I could have avoided that,’ even though as a casual you have no f***ing idea how hard it is, right?”

That speaks to another slow shift in fighting games taking place; even beyond their presence as fun games to play, the rise of Twitch and other streaming services have made watching games a more accepted practice. The fact that all of these games share the same space on most tournament weekends has given rise to a spectator class of fans who understand just enough to watch matches and enjoy them.

Mortal Kombat 11 And The Rise Of Pro Circuits

This year marked the first time Mortal Kombat 11 made an appearance at the show, closing out Saturday night with a contentious set of final bouts that saw Dominique “SonicFox” McLean take top honors (he also placed second in Dragon Ball FighterZ). NetherRealm has had a growing competitive scene of its own since 2011’s reboot, but two recent changes mean it could see even stronger growth going forward.

The first is MK 11 itself. “In my opinion, I can say without question MK 11 is the best game they’ve ever made, competitively,” says Ryan Neal, a Mortal Kombat streamer and commentator. Neal attributes his opinion to the heavier emphasis on the “neutral game,” where players are fighting to get their first attack in, as well as the relatively balanced roster out of the gate.

The second is the Pro Kompetition circuit, another in a trend for fighting games. The Capcom Cup tournament was introduced in 2013, and has since turned it into a full-blown circuit, with a massive prize pool and qualifier format that takes winners from other tournaments and pits them against each other.

Other games, like Tekken 7, Dragon Ball FighterZ, and now Mortal Kombat, have followed suit, introducing a new level of competition that differs from the kind of open-bracket tournament Evo provides. Circuits up the stakes for individual qualifier tournaments, most of which are already-established events granted official status by developers.

“The most prestigious thing you can win is the world tour, or whatever your game has,” says Jake Neal, also a Mortal Kombat competitor and commentator. Because these circuits ask players to win a major event before they can even compete, Neal says, it makes winning these events that much harder and more enticing.

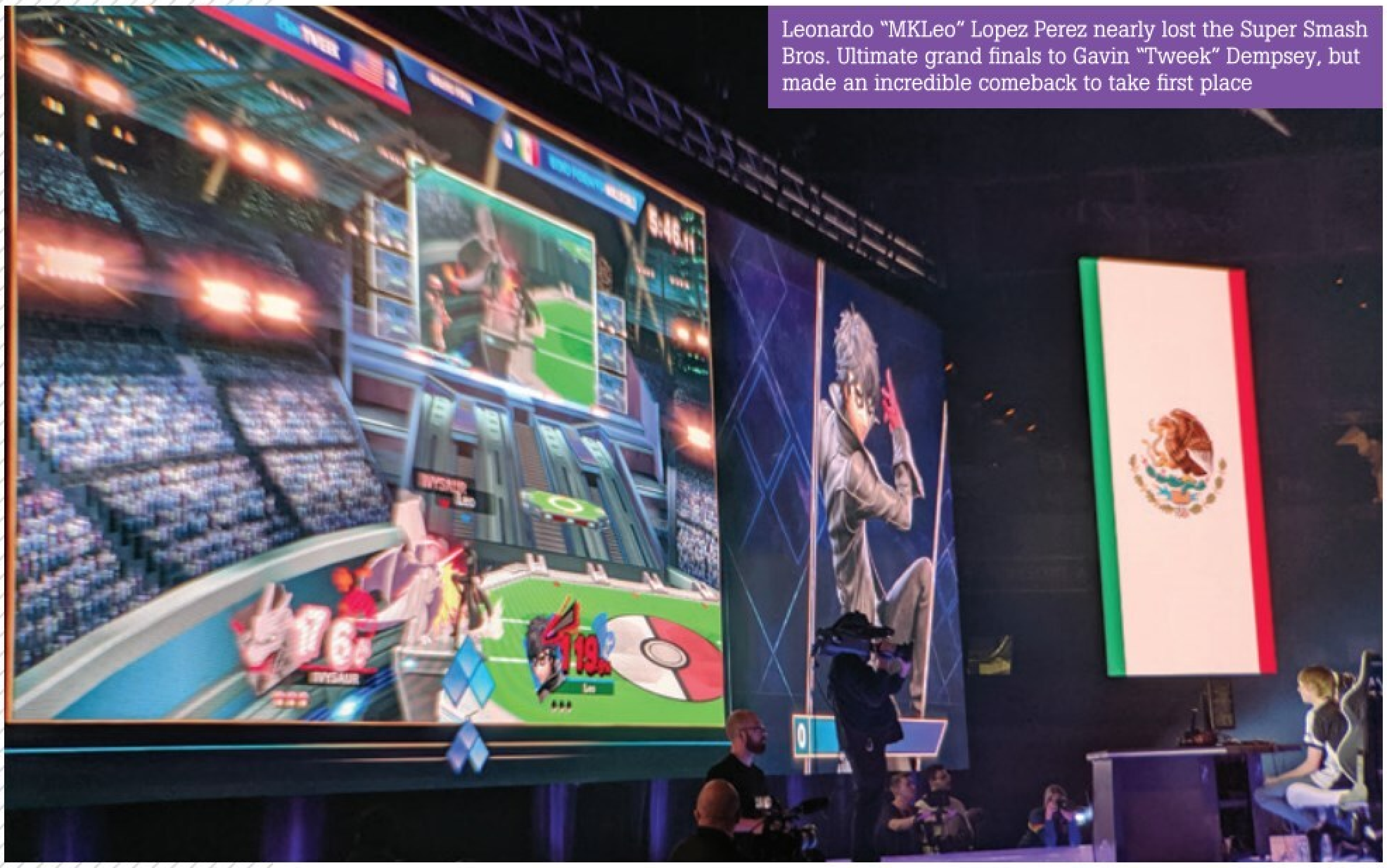
It helps that Tekken 7 had one of the easiest players to root for. Pakastani contestant Arslan “Arslan Ash” Siddique had the rare combination of an inspiring story and absolute dominance to rouse the crowd during the finals. As one of a few representatives from the Pakastani scene (which had long been touted as one of the world’s strongest Tekken communities but whose representation at events was overshadowed by South Korea and Japan), Siddique had his country on his back – and as the champion of the Evo Japan tournament earlier this year, a target to match.

This was one of many stories that has propelled Tekken into the spotlight as the “it” game across communities worldwide, and being the talk of the show in Vegas for a weekend is a testament both to what an event like Evo means for many of its fans, and how far Tekken has come. “It wasn’t that long ago that Tekken Tag Tournament 2 had its Evo top-8 on a Friday afternoon, so we’ve come a long way,” Parbhoo says.

TEKKEN 7
707
706
EVO
ELITE
AQUAFINA

Tekken 7 competitors fight it out during the early rounds of the tournament as a growing crowd gathers around them

Masato "Bonchan" Takahashi takes on Adel "Big Bird" Anouche in the grand finals of the Street Fighter V tournament


Leonardo "MKLeo" Lopez Perez nearly lost the Super Smash Bros. Ultimate grand finals to Gavin "Tweek" Dempsey, but made an incredible comeback to take first place

The Sunday finals for Evo took place at the Mandalay Bay Events Center

A COMMUNAL RE-BIRTH

Every year, Evo founder and president Joey "Mr. Wizard" Cuellar Wiz announces the tournament's official lineup on a livestream. While many of the games he listed this year were expected, one pick wasn't: Under Night In-Birth Exe:Late[st] (commonly known as UNIST), the latest update to a relatively unknown title that has slowly gained traction within fighting game circles in the past few years. It doesn't have the name recognition of Street Fighter or Mortal Kombat, but its selection speaks to how, despite the event's growing prominence and spectacle, it remains a grassroots effort.

Originally released in Japanese arcades in 2012 and unavailable stateside until 2015, UNIST didn't make the cut for an official event at Evo during its first year of release. It was instead relegated to its smaller sister event AnimEvo, which takes place during the same timeframe but is mostly run by a small group of fans along with some backing from Evo. Because of this, it was long thought UNIST would never hold a main-stage presence at the show, making its selection this year all the more of a surprise. "I would definitely say most people did not expect it," says Brett Young, a community organizer for events like AnimEvo.

However, since its 2015 Western release, fans have hosted and played in tournaments at many major events, even when the game is not officially listed on the marquee. They gathered in Discord servers and talked about the game, establishing strategies, coordinating online matches, and coaxing new players through UNIST's intricacies. They even banded together late last year to create a tournament just for UNIST, Climax of Night, which gave the game some time in the spotlight.

Momentum for the scene started off slow, but picked up a couple of years ago. "I remember looking at these brackets and not recognizing most of the people in them," Young says. It's hard to say exactly why entrants for the game shot up around this time, but Young has a few ideas. Much of UNIST's appeal comes from its mix of over-the-top anime style and relatively elegant fundamentals, wrapped around a tug-of-war resource management system called Vorpal. This mix of styles drew a wider audience than it otherwise might have. "When it first came out, a lot of people came from anime games, but there were also a lot of people who came from Street Fighter, just to try it," Young says.

It may not seem like much, but simply being part of Evo's lineup can do wonders for a game's competitive scene. In the wake of the announcement, Young noticed tournament attendance for UNIST shot up even further, fueling fiercer competition. UNIST has also been added to this year's Red Bull Conquest circuit (which also includes SF V and Tekken 7), so people outside the community are definitely taking notice – and all because of a single announcement and a dedicated following committed to playing their game simply because they love it.

BROS. IN ARMS

As heavyweights like Street Fighter and Tekken competed to see who the current favorite of the fighting game community was, Super Smash Bros. loomed large over Evo. It wasn't as talked-about as Tekken around the halls, and didn't have the heartwarming story of UNIST, but its massive 3,492 entrants made it the juggernaut of the show.

Evo and the Super Smash Bros. community have had a tumultuous relationship over the years. The two mostly came up without each other, outside of a couple of events in 2007 and 2008 where Super Smash Bros. Melee was a main-stage title. Even in 2013, when Melee returned to Evo after it won a contentious donation drive for charity, the Smash and fighting game communities were at odds with each other. Many hardcore players either didn't consider Smash a "real" fighting game, or didn't think it was on the same level as other mainstays. "Then Evo [2013] happened, and everyone was like, 'Oh, everyone's chanting, and it's really loud, and everyone cares. So yeah, I guess we're wrong,'" Lew says.

Despite Melee's strong attendance since then, it wasn't a main-stage game at Evo this year, which left much of the community disappointed. "I kind of just walked away from my screen and sat on the floor [when I heard the announcement]," says Juan "Hungrybox" DeBiedma, a former Melee Evo champion. "It was very sad for me ... [it was] more than one less tournament, it's like the end of a certain chapter." Evo, by virtue of its sheer scope as a gathering for people who love fighting games, had quickly become one of, if not the, biggest tournament for the Smash community.

Melee has a large enough scene outside of Evo that it isn't the end of the world. But it's still a major loss; even if it's not a community-run event, DeBiedma considers Evo *the* Smash tournament. "The platform it offered was by far the biggest one ... it can make or break careers," DeBiedma says. "There's a lot of prestige around it, a lot of hype that you can't get anywhere else. It was a really big deal for me."

When asked why Melee wasn't making the cut, Cuellar offered a contrite statement to fans. "Melee had a great run at Evo, and unfortunately it won't be an official title at Evo 2019." It's hard to say for sure why the game didn't return, but there are some contributing factors. For one, it's possible Melee had to make room for games which had official backing from its developers – Nintendo doesn't offer much lip service or support for Melee at this point. Another reason is that it's just not as practical to run as some other games: Melee requires heavy CRT monitors to play. Matches can also run long, especially when adhering to the community's preferred ruleset.

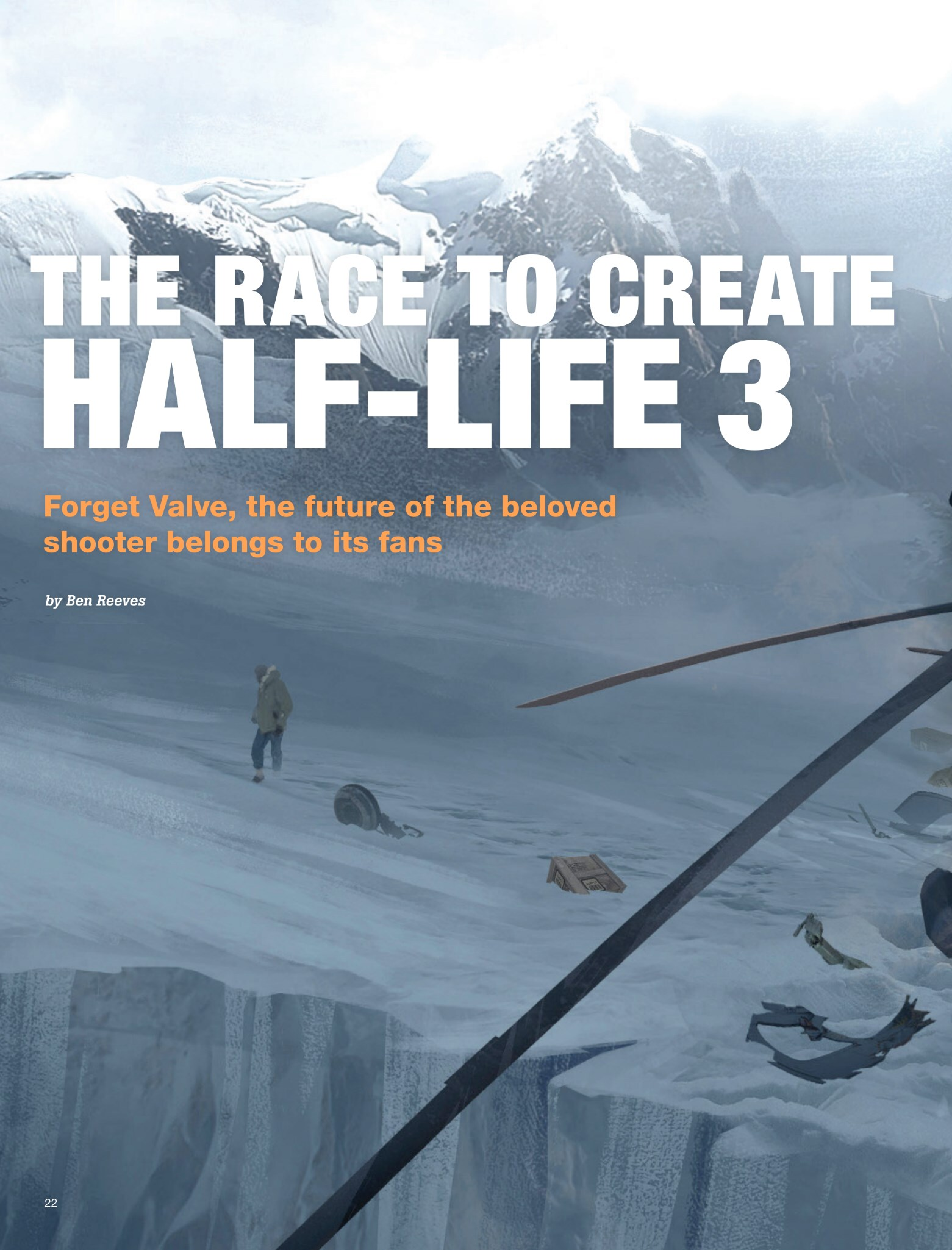
Whatever the reason, DeBiedma sees it as a potentially dangerous message for the community. "[It's] sort of Evo saying, 'Melee's had its time in the sun, it shouldn't be here anymore,'" he tells me. "And we don't want it to look that way. Melee's still a vibrant thing. It's still one of the biggest FGCs out there, competitively. A bunch of people still play it, and viewership at the events is still huge ... I'm just hoping that in the future, somehow we come back."

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate proved to be a wonderful representative for the Smash community in the meantime, however. In fact, one of the most surprising threads throughout this year and at Evo was how people from all kinds of FGCs (including Melee's, which is known for sticking to their game and disregarding its sequels) have taken to Ultimate. Many of Melee's strongest players, such as Joseph "Mango" Marquez, William "Leffen" Hjelte, and DeBiedma have all taken a liking to it. "[Ultimate] is definitely the game that's hit the nail on the head the hardest since Melee," DeBidema says.

The result is an event that is not only bringing the Smash community together but building up both it and the FGC as a whole. Ultimate is by far the biggest event at Evo, and Evo is by far the biggest Ultimate event thus far, beating out community-run competitions like the Genesis tournament, which had 2,100 entrants for the game. "It's definitely something that's really good for the scene," Lew says. "It was good for the melee scene ... And it will be good for Ultimate."

These kinds of relationships between events and games are common, and are a sign the scene is growing. That growth seems to be uplifting just about every game; throughout the weekend, no matter where your scene or heart lied, it was easy to be overwhelmed by excitement. As you fought your way out of the early rounds of one tournament (or drowned within them), you'd hear cheers from the crowd gathered around another. And even if you never planned to play a single match of what they were playing, you'd catch yourself smiling. It was hard not to under that big roof. ◆

Marie-Laure "Kayane" finished seventh in the Soulcalibur VI tournament, losing to Jonathan "Woahhzz" Vo



THE RACE TO CREATE HALF-LIFE 3

Forget Valve, the future of the beloved shooter belongs to its fans

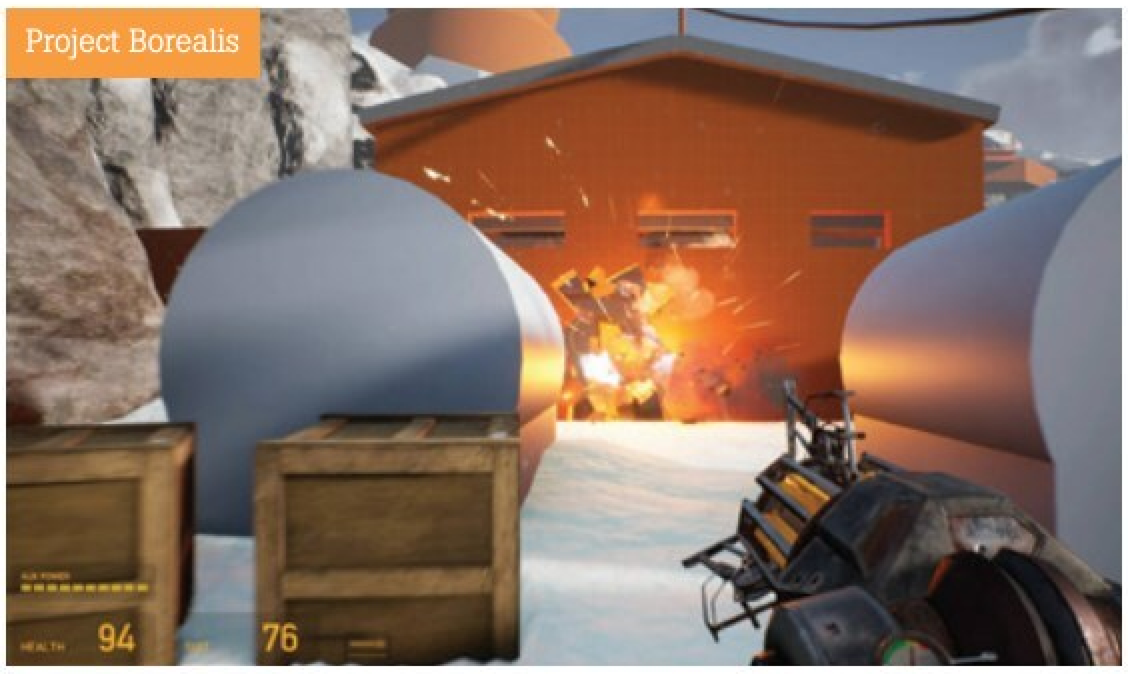
by Ben Reeves

H

Half-Life is one of the most revered franchises in the world. Not only did it establish Valve as a premier developer, it redefined player expectations for first-person storytelling, world building, and enemy A.I. Half-Life 2 and its episodic follow-ups continued to push the FPS genre into bold new directions until Half-Life 2: Episode Two released in 2007. After Episode 2's cliffhanger ending, fans couldn't wait to experience the climax of Gordon Freeman's epic struggle against the totalitarian, multidimensional aliens known as the Combine.

They're still waiting.

As Valve's focus has shifted toward maintaining its digital Steam store and the online game-as-service Dota 2, the Half-Life brand seems to have been abandoned by its creators. Many fans wonder if we'll ever see another Half-Life game. Others feel that it is time to take matters into their own hands. If Valve isn't going to make another Half-Life, its fans will.

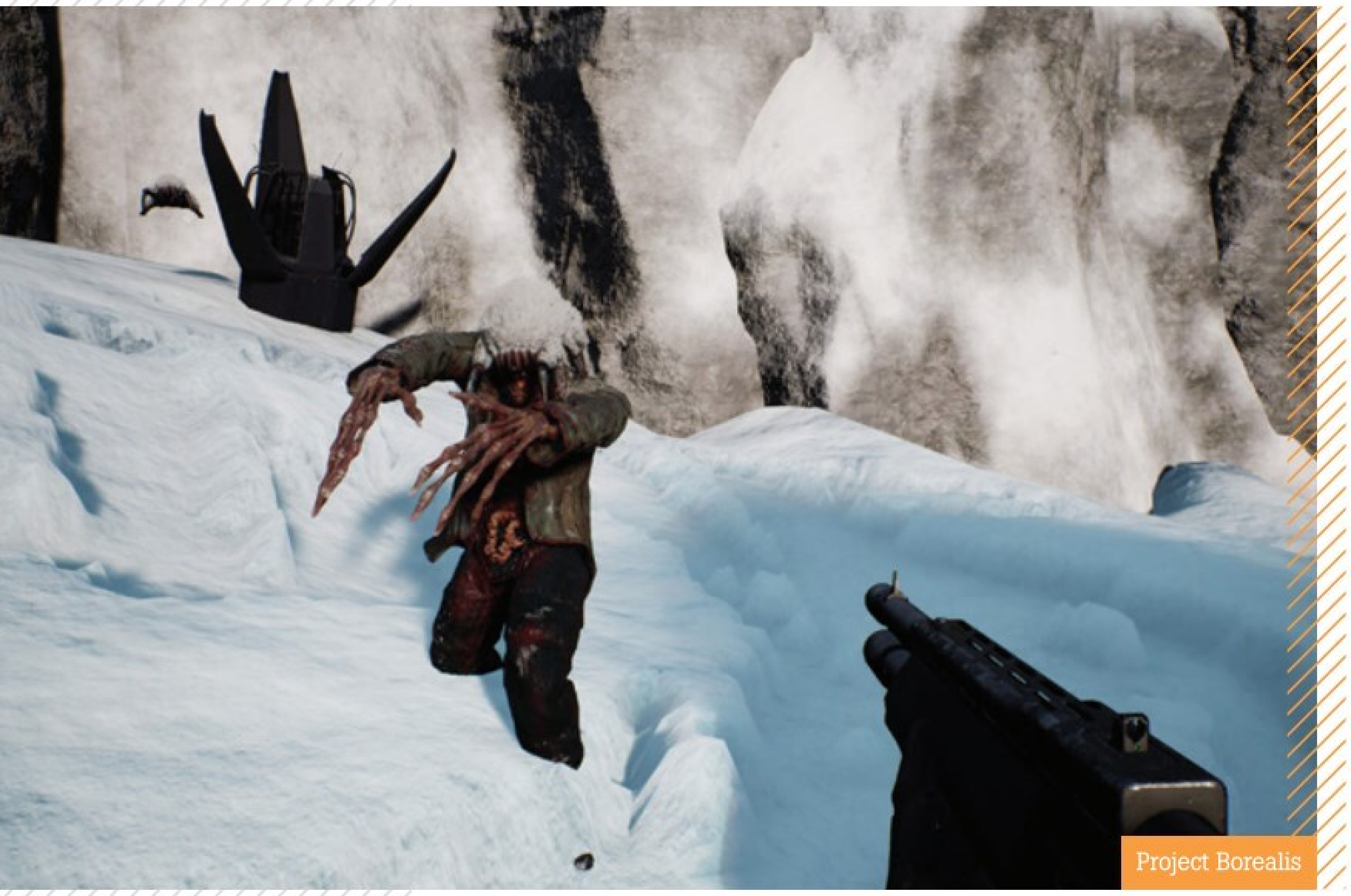


INSIDE PROJECT BOREALIS

On August 25, 2017, Half-Life writer and ex-Valve employee Marc Laidlaw wrote a blog post called Epistle 3. The post detailed the exploits of a couple of scientists who traveled to the arctic in search of a mysterious ship that had begun to shift in and out of reality. Laidlaw didn't use the words Half-Life, Gordon Freeman, or Combine in his post, but the inference was clear: This was the outline for the missing episode in the Half-Life series.

"It was sort of vaguely cryptic, but everyone quickly realized that it was his interpretation of what Half-Life: Episode Three was supposed to be," says Sam Walton, PR lead for the fan-driven Project Borealis. "The Half-Life community took that as a signal that Half-Life 3 was probably not going to happen. Like, if the lead writer was happy to publish that kind of thing, maybe the game was never coming out. We had always thought, 'Maybe it's being worked on somewhere behind the scenes.' But a lot of people saw that post and said, 'Well, that's probably that.'"

But out of disappointment grew a bold idea: Now that fans had an outline for the next Half-Life, maybe they didn't need to wait for Valve to finally get around to working on the game; they could just do it themselves. Dozens of Half-Life fans started to congregate around the subreddit r/DreamsofHalfLife3, where they talked about making the next Half-Life themselves. The team christened themselves Project Borealis (a nod to an Aperture Science research vessel introduced in Half-Life 2: Episode Two), and over the course of the last two years that initial group of fans has grown to over 80 designers – approximately the same number of developers listed in the credits of Half-Life 2.


Project Borealis

This eclectic team holds a wide array of interests and specialties and is spread across the U.S., U.K., eastern Europe, Russia, Australia, and South America.

"We have team members who are currently or have previously worked at triple-A game development studios, including Blizzard, Ubisoft, and id Software," says Walton. "Others have previously contributed to community projects such as Black Mesa or other Half-Life mods. And we have many team members who are currently at university or working for non-game dev organizations."

Project Borealis' scrappy, ad-hoc development team is full of part timers and hobbyists, but it is also run a bit like a commercial game studio. Team members have official job titles, report to team leads, commit to deadlines, and conduct group meetings. Project Borealis even lists open positions on its site and conducts interviews with newcomers before they join the team.

Over the last two years, this collective of weekend warriors has designed an impressive-looking shooter. Laidlaw's blog post talked a lot about Half-Life's story, but was vague on gameplay, which gives Project Borealis a fairly long leash with which to experiment. The team wants to push the envelope a bit and add modern gameplay sensibilities, such as destructible environments, snow vehicles, and new enemies like frostbitten headcrab zombies. At the same time, Project Borealis is committed to making a game that stays faithful to what the series has done before.

"We want this to feel natural," says Walton. "We were not going to add aiming down the sights or cover mechanics so it becomes a completely different game. But it's been more than 10 years since Episode Two, so we're experimenting with stuff that's a natural next step. We added a vortex mode to the Gravity Gun, so it can create these kind of tornados with hundreds of physics objects. That kind of stuff."

The new bells and whistles in Project Borealis' Half-Life project are only possible because the team made the controversial decision to move away from Valve's long-running Source engine. In a surprise move, the team is developing on the Unreal Engine.

"When we started the project, everyone's assumption was that we would use the Source engine," says Walton. "But early on, the programming team said, 'You know, I don't think that's a good idea. The Source engine is old, it hasn't been updated in at least five years. It's not going to be fun to work with.' Some of the Half-Life community was hesitant about us using Unreal Engine. Like, 'Is that gonna feel like Half-Life?' People have played that game so much that if something feels wrong, they'll know. So when we decided on Unreal, there was this other group that said, 'Well, we'll do it using Source!'"

INSIDE BOREAL ALYPH

By day, David Mason is a student studying digital animation at The University of Alabama. By night, he assists with programming, sound design, texture art, and modeling as part of Keep Away From Fire's development community. Mason has been a part of the Half-Life modding community since he was in junior high, so when he was offered the chance to become a design lead on Keep Away From Fire's effort to develop Half-Life 3 in Source, he jumped at the chance.

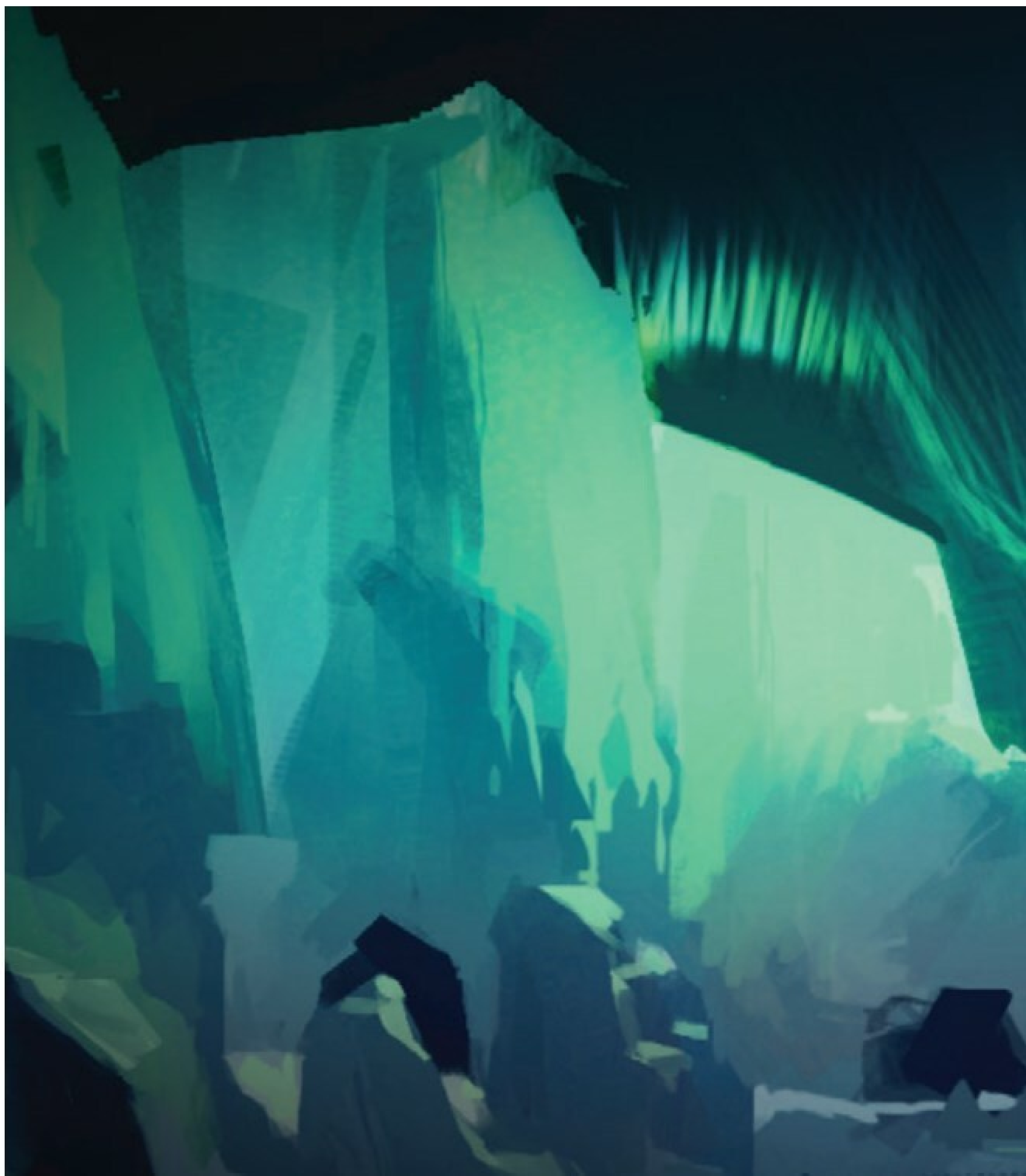
Keep Away From Fire's Half-Life project has the working title Boreal Alyph. Boreal is an obscure word for north and alyph is a corruption of the Yiddish word for time. In turn, "Northern Time," is a reference to Marc Laidlaw's blog post and its story set in the arctic. Unlike Project Borealis, however, the Boreal Alyph team doesn't see Laidlaw's outline as gospel.

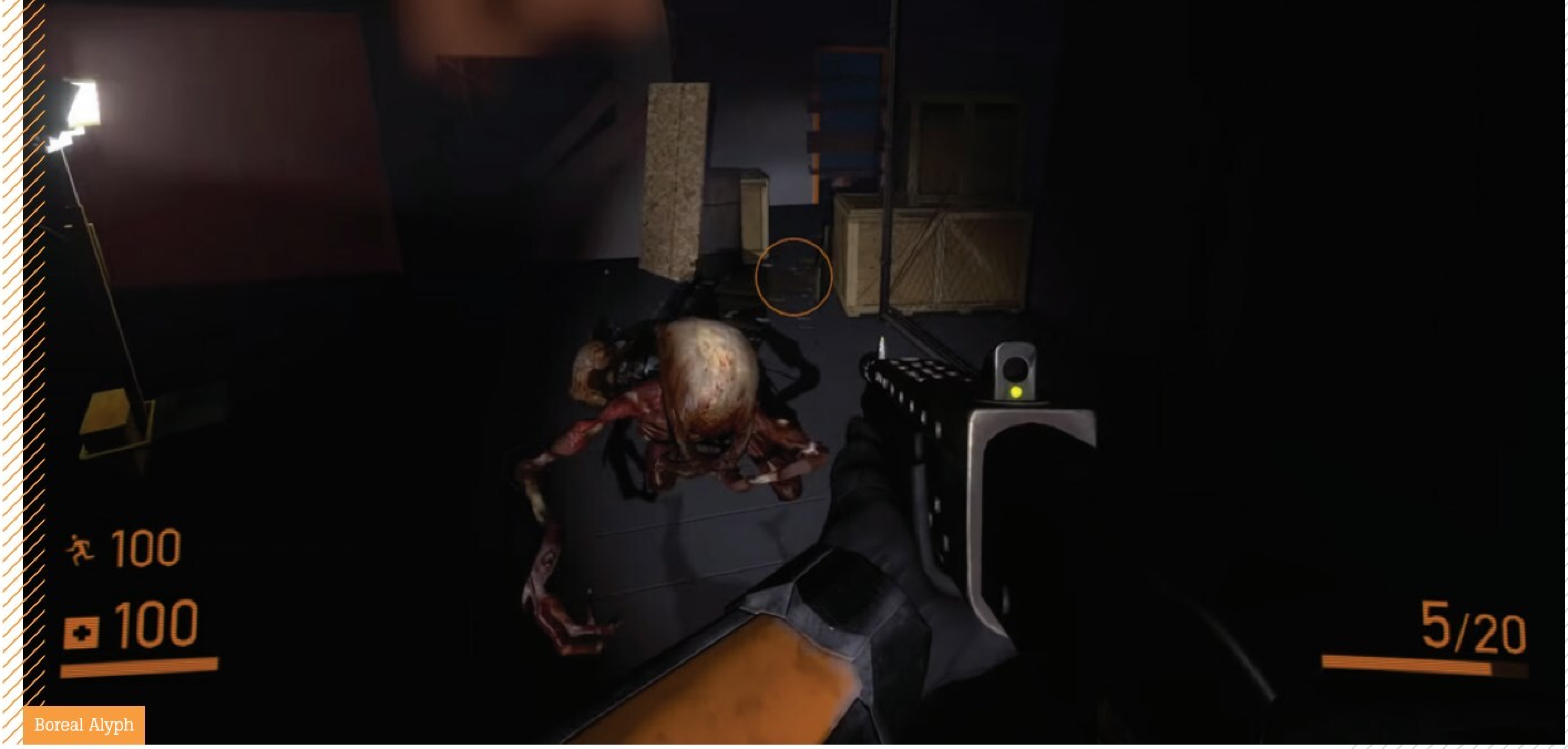
"[Laidlaw's blog post] is kind of just a guideline, you know, a rough draft of our game," says Mason. "We're in this process of constant revision with this project. I'll be the first to admit our limitations. We don't have professional experience. A lot of us have never shipped a full product before, and so we're having to figure out things on the fly."

Boreal Alyph's version of Half-Life Episode Three takes Gordan Freeman and Alyx Vance to a weather station on a remote island somewhere in northern Russia, but this is just the start of a much larger journey, and players will eventually travel to research stations, coal mines, and mining settlements across the globe. The Boreal Alyph team has put a lot of time into developing its own characters, locations, and narrative arc for this version of Half-Life 3.

The Boreal Alyph team disputes the idea that their project spun off of Project Borealis' decision to use Unreal, but one thing is certain: The Boreal Alyph team is committed to using Valve's Source engine. In fact, the Boreal Alyph team has already worked out a deal with Valve to license the Source Engine for non-commercial use. This means the team can edit the engine's code, but can't sell its final product. These types of licensing deals are rare, so many within the Boreal Alyph community feel Valve has given Boreal Alyph its blessing. Using the Source engine has allowed Boreal Alyph to nail the feel of a Half-Life game from day one. Of course, that doesn't mean development has been entirely smooth.

"Source is definitely not as user friendly or as well-documented as something modern like Unreal or Unity," says Mason. "It gives us a lot of trouble sometimes. For example, graphically, it's hard to do a lot of modern shading



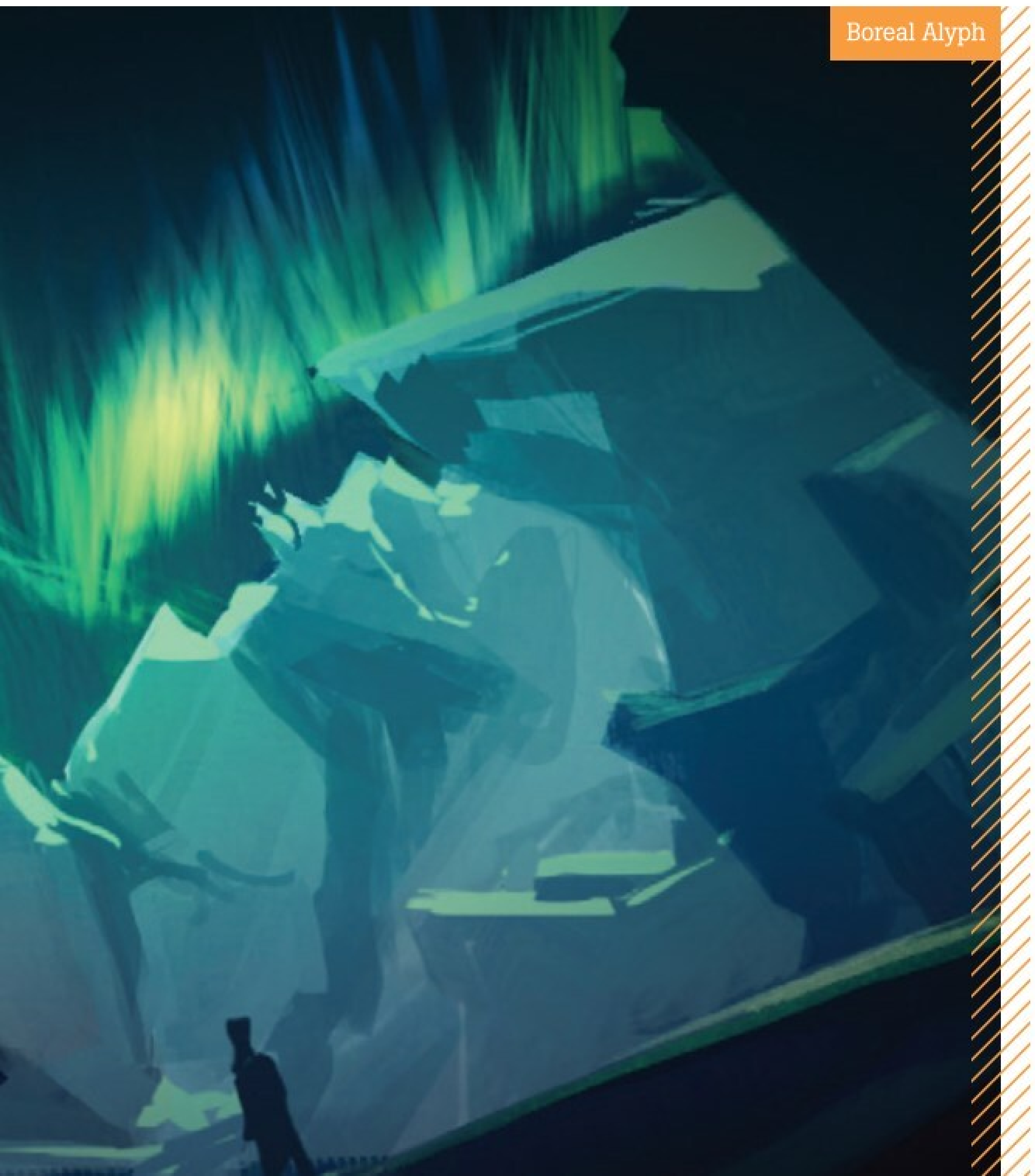


Boreal Alyph

techniques, because Source Engine is on DirectX 9, which is very old at this point. It's a constant fight to see how we can modernize the graphics in a way that won't take 20 years or make us pull out all our hair."

The Source engine may be long in the tooth, but the Boreal Alyph team has put it to good use. A small group of programmers have already rewritten the system's A.I., so Combine soldiers now flank the player, which is not something enemies did in the original games. To date, the team has spent a lot of time on the gunplay and enemy design. One new creature is a medic variant who releases a support drone that flies around the environment and heals fellow enemy soldiers. The Boreal Alyph team is also tinkering with a heavy Combine unit who has a massive health pool and carries a chain gun.

"We are definitely trying to emulate the style of Half-Life 2," says Mason. "We're planning our own vehicle section, and the beginning of the game is supposed to be a lot like Ravenholm – the horror section from Half-Life 2. We're kind of recreating that, but in a style similar to *The Thing* or Metro 2033. You're in this frozen wasteland, and you're stranded, and everything's going to hell."



Boreal Alyph

SLOW AND STEADY TOWARD THE FINISH LINE

Both Project Borealis and Boreal Alyph started with the noble desire to give fans like themselves the experience they had been craving for over a decade. In the process, these collectives have learned game development is much harder than it looks. In some ways, both groups have faced challenges that even commercial game studios don't have to worry about.

"We have this distributed, completely volunteer group of people, and we somehow have to pull them together so we can actually get this game done," says Walton. "I think that's definitely the biggest challenge for us. We've got people who know Half-Life inside-out and Unreal Engine inside-out. The technical side of things is fairly there, but figuring out the organizational aspect, keeping things together, that's probably the biggest challenge."

"It's a unique beast doing business over the internet when people are spread out over every time zone from Pacific U.S. time to Moscow time," echoes Mason. "People have jobs and school, and they're not physically in the same location. It just doesn't work the same as a traditional, physical studio environment where people actually go in and meet each other every day. And they're paid! That's a huge motivator. You just kind of have to take a much more hands-off, slow-and-steady approach to development."

At the end of the day, Project Borealis and Boreal Alyph rely on the fact that their teams want to work on these projects in their free time. When life's circumstances change, sometimes those desires change. Commitment is a huge problem for both communities. Members of Keep Away From Fire have even experienced a phenomenon they've dubbed the "Boreal Alyph curse," because it seems like the most committed members of the team continue to get hired away by commercial game-development studios and into paid positions where they can no longer work on a Half-Life fan project.

Given all of the factors that feed into the development of these community-driven projects, it's a miracle both Project Borealis and Boreal Alyph have progressed as far as they have. Both teams have built robust playable builds that look like professional game projects. Still, the road to the finish line is paved with a number of unconquered challenges, and neither group is willing to commit to a release date. So, for the moment, both groups of junior designers are slowly plugging away on their dream game. A legion of Half-Life fans eagerly await the release of the next Half-Life game, and these fan projects might be their greatest hope.

After all, who else is going to make a new Half-Life game?

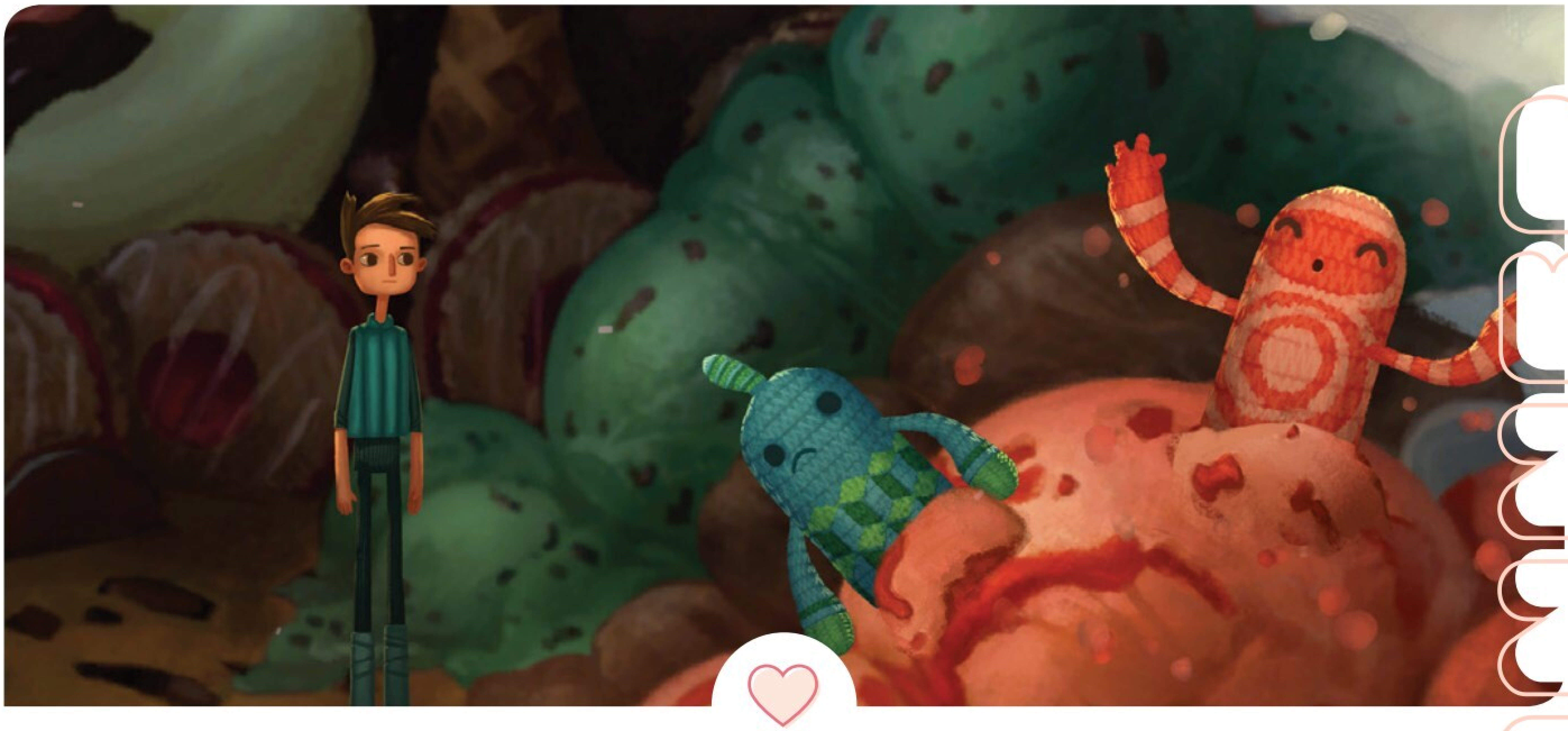
CROWDFUNDING'S BIGGEST WINNERS & LOSERS

For the last decade, game developers have turned to platforms like Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and Fig to finance their projects. Crowdfunding lets the community members directly support the kinds of games they want to play, making it possible for studios (or individuals) to create games that otherwise might have never existed.

The traditional publishing model involves guesswork regarding what people will or won't buy, but crowdfunded projects allow fans to demonstrate their interest (and financial support) immediately. But even with that instant feedback, the fans aren't in total control. A successful campaign is just the first step; once the developer raises the money, a crowdfunded game can still be good or bad – or even fail to release altogether. This month, we're taking a look at some of the noteworthy video games at the far ends of the crowdfunding spectrum: the spectacular triumphs and the lamentable disasters.

BY JOE JUBA

♥ winner ☹ loser



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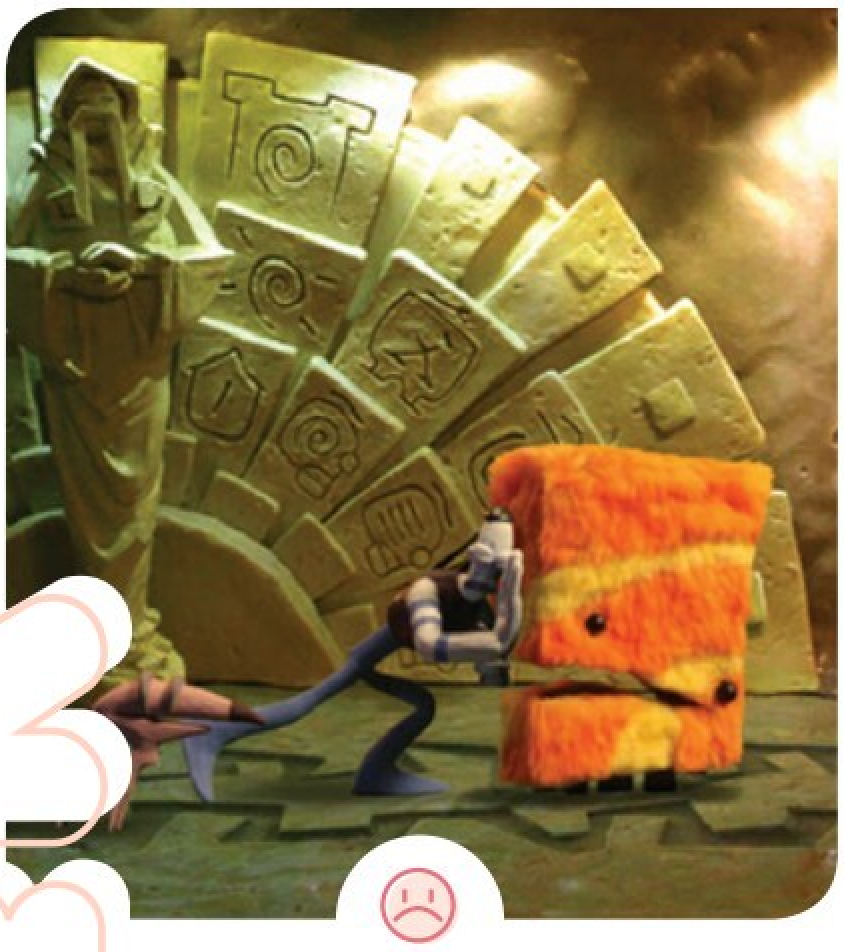
Broken Age

Pitch: Simply called “Double Fine Adventure” at first, Broken Age is a classic point-and-click adventure in the spirit of LucasArts classics like Full Throttle and Monkey Island. Another part of the campaign is an episodic documentary from 2 Player Productions, providing backers with a candid look at the development process.

Result: This wasn’t the first game financed through Kickstarter, but by raising a massive amount of money (over $3.3m), Broken Age firmly established crowdfunding as a new alternative to the traditional game-publishing structure. Though the project took longer than planned and was eventually split into two parts (fully released in April 2015), the end result was a good adventure game that delivered on its central promise.



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Armikrog

Pitch: Do you remember The Neverhood? It was an adventure game with a cool claymation aesthetic, and now members of the team are regrouping to make a new title in the same vein. Armikrog is an art-forward game, with stop-motion animation and an original score from The Nerverhood’s Terry Taylor.

Result: Armikrog looked good. It also faithfully recreated many of the worst aspects of ’90s adventure games, like dull puzzles, aimless clicking, and unclear objectives. Beyond the design issues, the $974k raised on Kickstarter wasn’t enough to iron out the array of bugs and other technical problems.

Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night

Pitch: Konami has abandoned 2D Castlevania titles, so longtime Castlevania producer Koji Igarashi decides to bring his signature style to a new gothic-horror game. Bloodstained features a frightening array of weapons and monsters, all in an enormous castle for players to explore.

Result: The Kickstarter for Bloodstained raised over $5.5m in 2015. The art style changed and the game overshot its targeted March 2017 release by a full two years, but when it finally came out this June, Bloodstained satisfied the old-school Castlevania craving with style.

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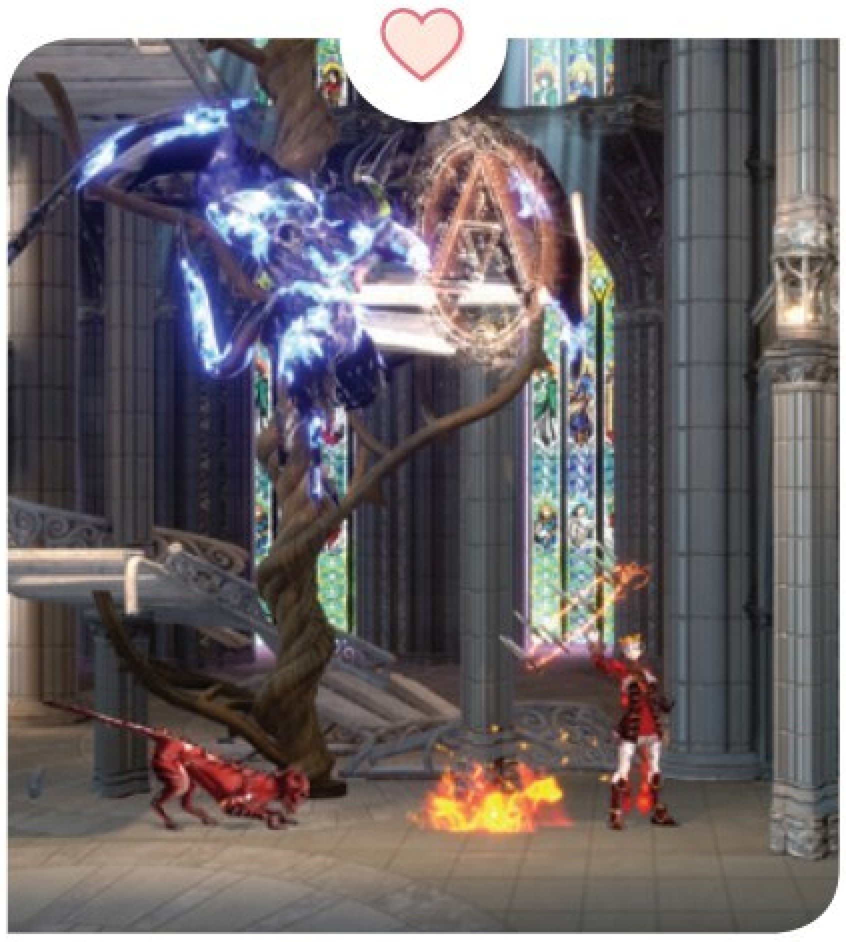

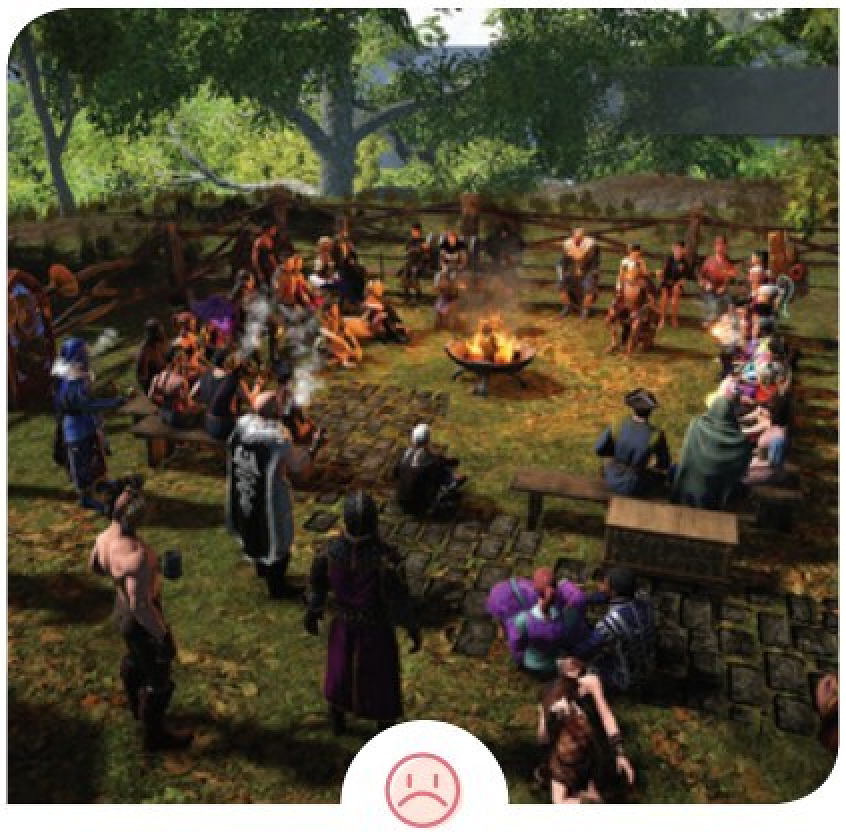

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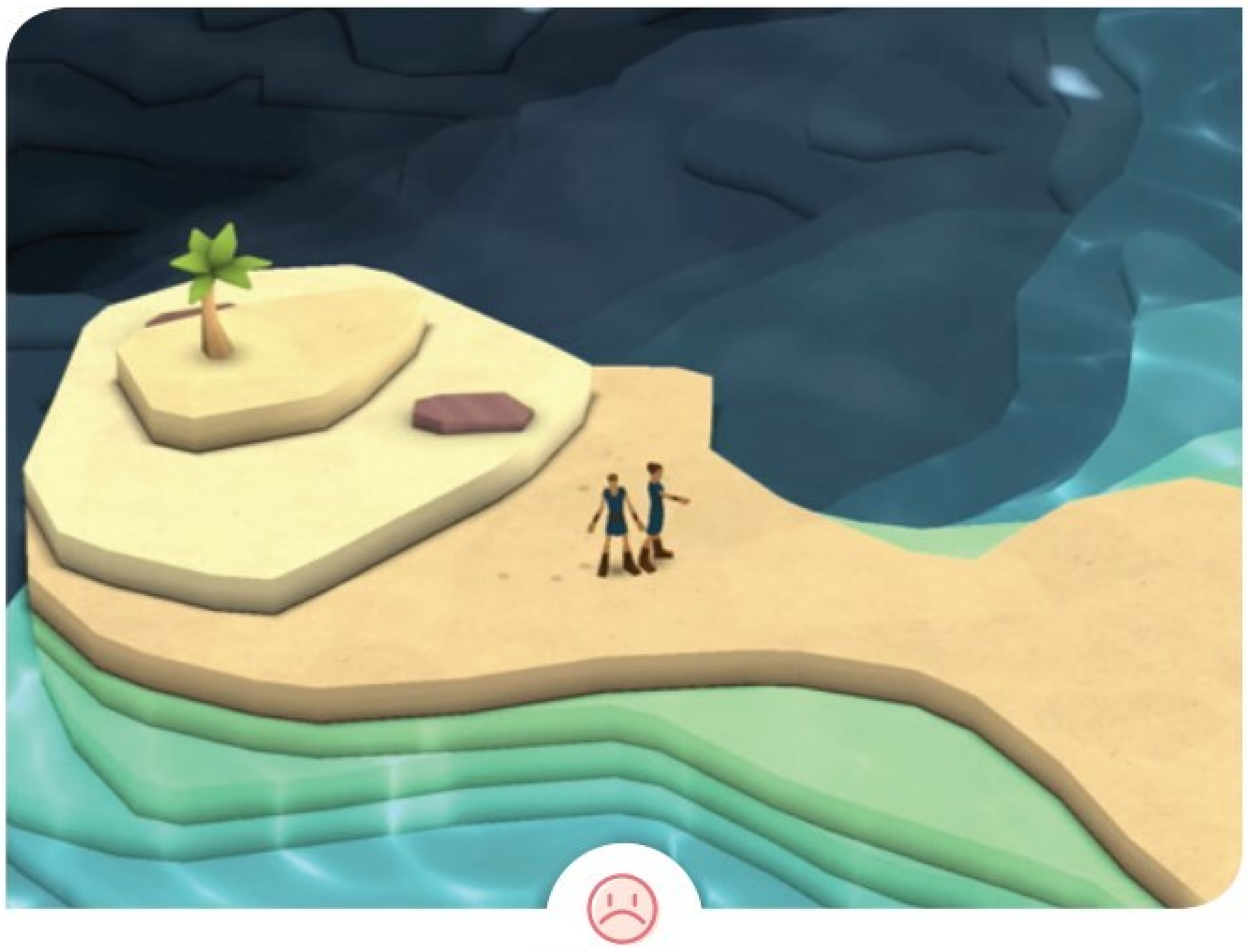
Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues

Pitch: The Ultima series is part of the foundation of the entire RPG genre, and creator Richard Garriott has a new project to redefine the “role” in “role-playing.” Without explicit objective checklists, players can find their own paths through the dynamic world and craft their own narratives.

Result: Shroud of the Avatar pulled in $1.9m on Kickstarter, but the project’s high ambitions resulted in a fuzzy focus. The lack of guidance was frustrating rather than empowering, and it felt torn between its single-player and MMO aspirations. It went free-to-play seven months after release, but still hasn’t found a substantial audience.



Godus

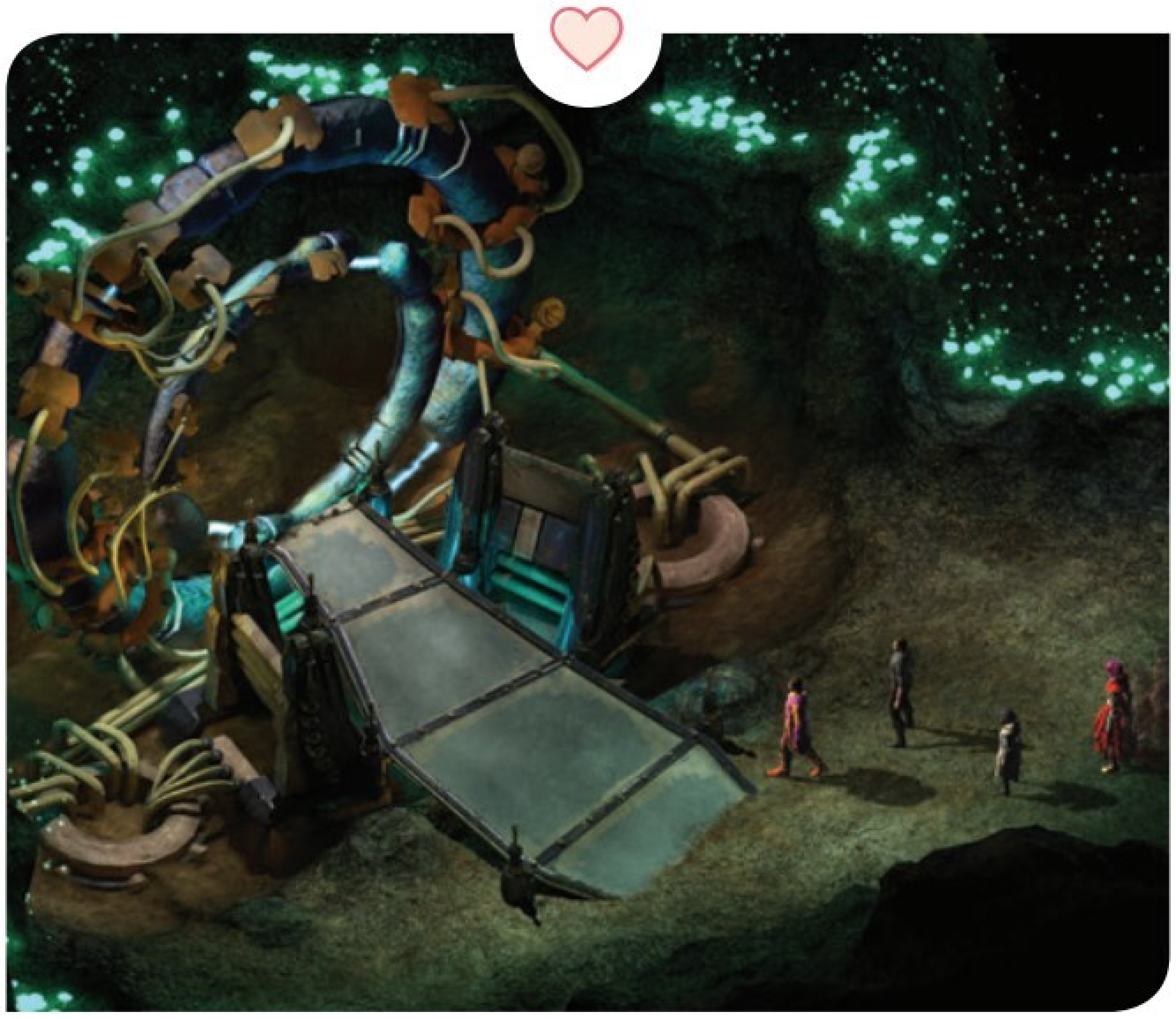
Pitch: Peter Molyneux – the mind behind Populous, Dungeon Keeper, Black & White, and Fable – is back with a new studio called 22Cans. Get your hopes up, because he's making some big promises about his new god game! Players can build intricate civilizations, terraform to their hearts' content, and engage in multiplayer clashes between gods.

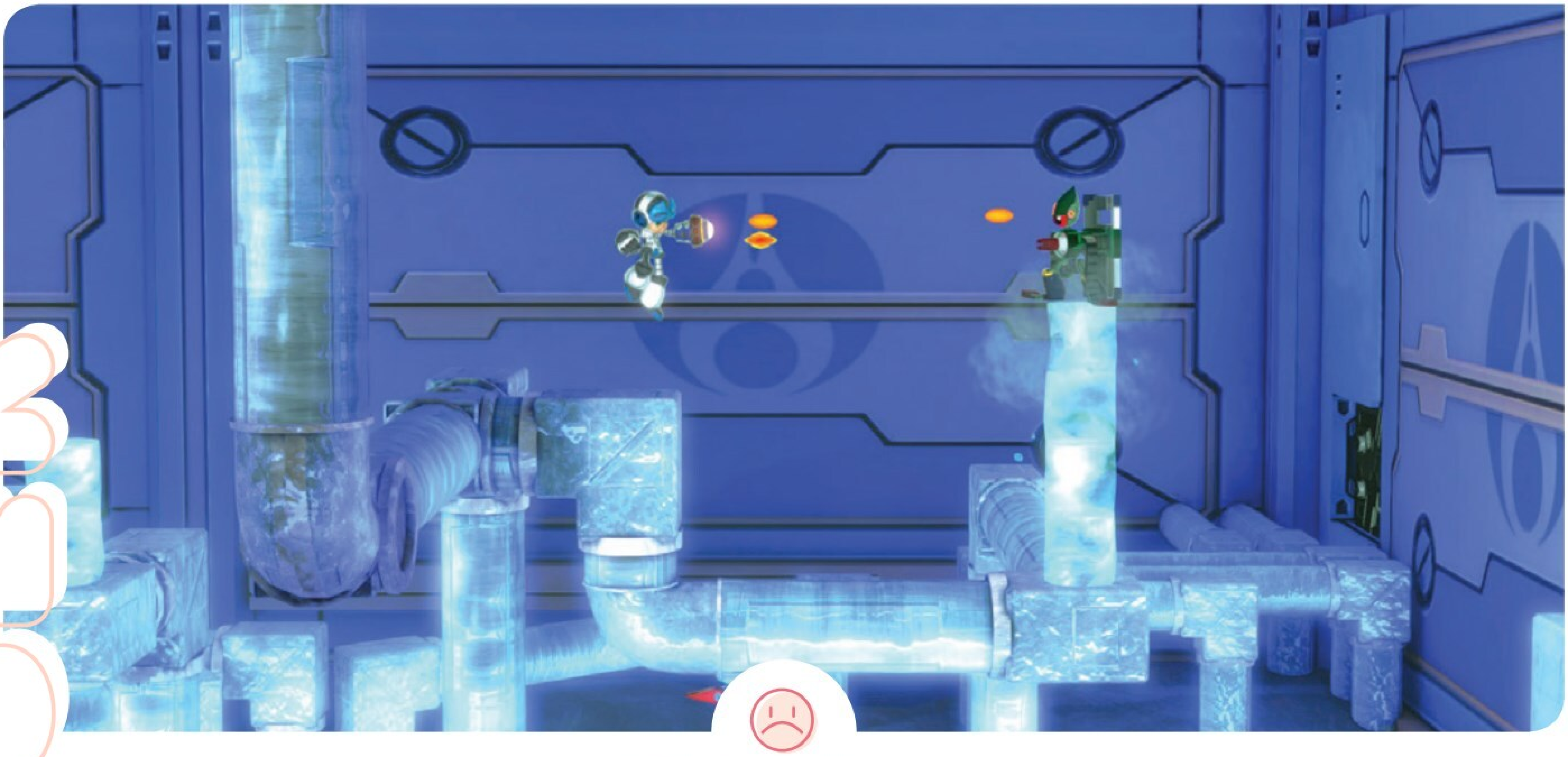
Result: Godus was a mess. It raised over £526k (about $850k) on Kickstarter, but major features like multiplayer never materialized. A buggy, threadbare PC version was released to early access, but left unattended as the team focused on the microtransaction-laden mobile iteration. Also, the winner of a mobile game/experiment called Curiosity was supposed to reign as the god above gods, but 22Cans didn't hold up its end of that bargain. Then Molyneux abandoned Godus entirely to work on another project.

Isometric RPGs

Pitch: Do you miss the old RPGs you used to play on your PC? Now you can relive those days with an array of similar experiences from some of the biggest names in the field. You manage party members, queue up actions, and read tons of dialogue and flavor text in these massive adventures.

Result: This genre may cater to a specific appetite, but it's seeing an amazing renaissance thanks to crowdfunding. In fact, this is the only catch-all category on this list because the successes are too many to list individually, including the Divinity: Original Sin series, Pillars of Eternity series, Torment: Tides of Numenera, Wasteland 2, Shadowrun Returns, and more.





Mighty No. 9

Pitch: Famous for his work on the Mega Man series, Keiji Inafune is making a spiritual successor. Mighty No. 9 puts modern twists on the formula fans remember so well: running and jumping through stages, fighting robot bosses, and earning new powers along the way.

Result: Poor communication and multiple delays led to frustration with Inafune and his studio, Comcept, but the bigger issue was Mighty No. 9's overall quality. When it finally released, the game felt more like a lifeless Mega Man clone than a nostalgia-driven homage, which surprised the Kickstarter backers who pledged over $3.8m to make it happen.

Hollow Knight

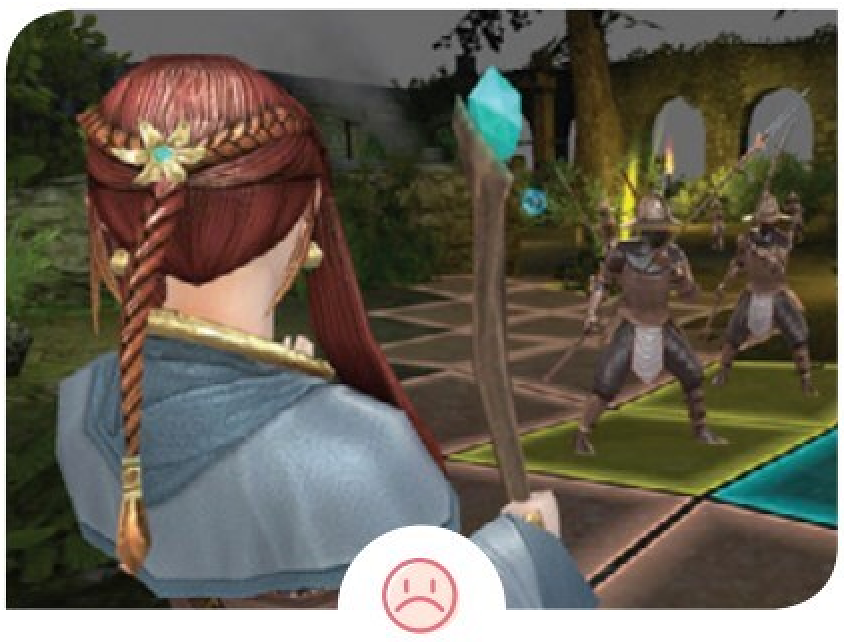
Pitch: A haunting world, precise combat, and striking visuals are at the core of this 2D action/adventure game. A tiny nail-wielding warrior fights through bug-infested corridors, blending the exploration of series like Metroid and Castlevania with the challenge of Dark Souls.

Result: Australia-based Team Cherry raised AU$57k (about $46k) through its Kickstarter. Since then, Hollow Knight has become one of the most celebrated indie games out there thanks to its flexible combat and unique atmosphere. One of the campaign's stretch goals (a new playable character) grew into more than a simple add-on, and is now being developed as a full sequel called Hollow Knight: Silksong.

Clang

Pitch: The sword is a key ingredient of many video games, but none of them capture the visceral thrill and tactical nuance of sword-fighting. Author Neal Stephenson (*Snow Crash*, *Cryptonomicon*) aims to change that by developing digital sword-fighting tools and a playable prototype (and eventually a full game) that raise the bar for this popular type of action.

Result: Technically, Stephenson's Subutai Corporation accomplished its goal. It spent its $526k from Kickstarter developing a Clang demo, but by Stephenson's own admission, it focused too much on historical accuracy and not enough on entertainment. "The prototype was technically innovative, but it wasn't very fun to play," he wrote in the project's final update. No full game is forthcoming.



Unsung Story

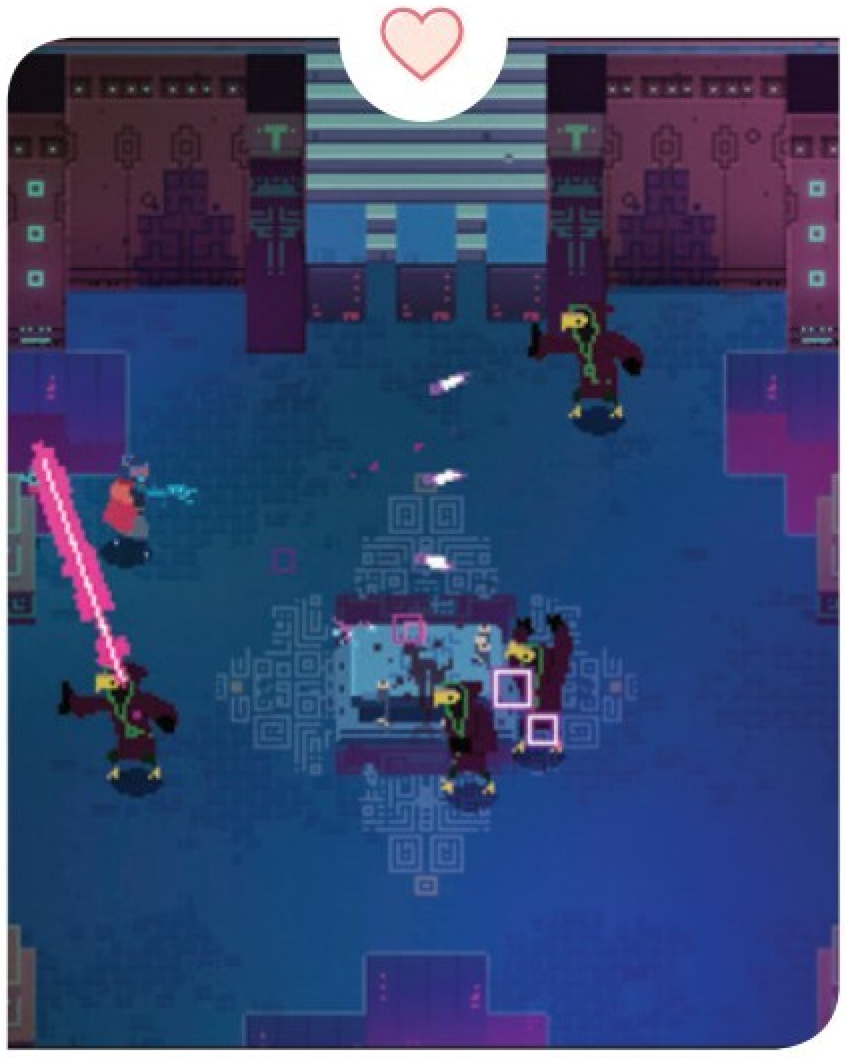
Pitch: Developer Playdek is teaming up with Yasumi Matsuno (Final Fantasy Tactics, Tactics Ogre, Vagrant Story) to create a new tactical RPG. With a campaign reminiscent of the legendary creator's previous work, plus expanded options for cooperative and competitive play, this is the turn-based strategy game genre fans have been dreaming about.

Result: After raising $660k on Kickstarter, Playdek became conspicuously uncommunicative. The studio had little to show for its effort beyond unimpressive screenshots. Matsuno was no longer involved with the project, and the planned May 2015 release came and went with no updates to backers. Eventually, Playdek handed over development to Little Orbit, which started from scratch using Matsuno's designs. Though Little Orbit has been making progress, Unsung Story has an infamous history that will be difficult to rewrite.

Hyper Light Drifter

Pitch: Hyper Light Drifter combines the appeal of top-down Zelda titles with a retro pixel-and-synth aesthetic. Also, instead of the Zelda series' idyllic fantasy setting, this journey takes place in a mysterious post-apocalyptic landscape.

Result: Blowing past the original $27k goal, developer Heart Machine's Kickstarter raised $645k to make this captivating, minimalist adventure. The speedy combat and cool setting were augmented by an entrancing soundtrack from the artist Disasterpeace.



Non-Starters

No matter how much it seems like people want a certain game, crowdfunding doesn't work if they don't back it. These projects seemed like surefire successes with pedigrees and built-in fanbases, but they just couldn't get the backers they needed.

Shadow of the Eternals
From the minds behind the GameCube classic Eternal Darkness, this spiritual successor promised a return of the action/adventure gameplay focused on your characters' sanity. However, controversy and legal trouble made it difficult for potential backers to place faith in developer Precursor Games, and Shadow of the Eternals' canceled-and-rebooted 2013 Kickstarter campaign failed to reach its adjusted goal.

Blackroom
John Romero and Adrian Carmack, famous for their work on Doom at id Software, were collaborating on a brand-new FPS. Under the banner Night Work Games, the team turned to Kickstarter to fund this fast-paced, skill-based shooter. After four days, the campaign was not on pace to meet its goal, and it was pulled until a demo could be produced. That was in 2016, and Blackroom has not resurfaced.

Red Ash: The Indelible Legend
In 2015, after Mighty No. 9 was funded but before it released, developer Comcept launched another Kickstarter inspired by the Blue Bomber. Red Ash would have emulated the Mega Man Legends series, but increasing wariness surrounding the fate of Mighty No. 9 instilled doubt about the viability of another game from former Capcom producer Keiji Inafune. The campaign failed, but Comcept said an investment from Fuze Entertainment would allow development to proceed. No updates on Red Ash have been issued in the four years since.

On The Horizon

These are all projects with successful crowdfunding campaigns that we're excited to play. However because they haven't released in full, the judgment on their final quality is still pending.

Indivisible
In 2015, developer Lab Zero Games (the studio behind Skullgirls) used Indiegogo to fund this stylish action/RPG that draws inspiration from Valkyrie Profile. Gorgeous art and animation brings the exploration meets strategic combat to life, and you can play the final version on October 8.

Shenmue III
When it seemed like all hope of a new entry was lost, Shenmue III's 2015 announcement promised the continuation of this action/RPG saga. After contributing over $7m across multiple crowdfunding platforms, fans will finally get this long-awaited sequel on November 19.

Ghost Song
Ghost Song is an atmospheric sci-fi side-scroller that takes plenty of inspiration from Metroid, putting players in a suit of armor to explore an eerily beautiful alien landscape. The Kickstarter campaign succeeded back in 2013, and the game has a 2020 launch target.

Heart Forth, Alicia
With a deep magic system and other RPG elements, this fantasy-themed action/adventure gives players a variety of tools to solve puzzles and complete quests across beautiful interconnected areas. The release window has changed a few times since the success of the 2014 Kickstarter, but right now 2020 is the goal.

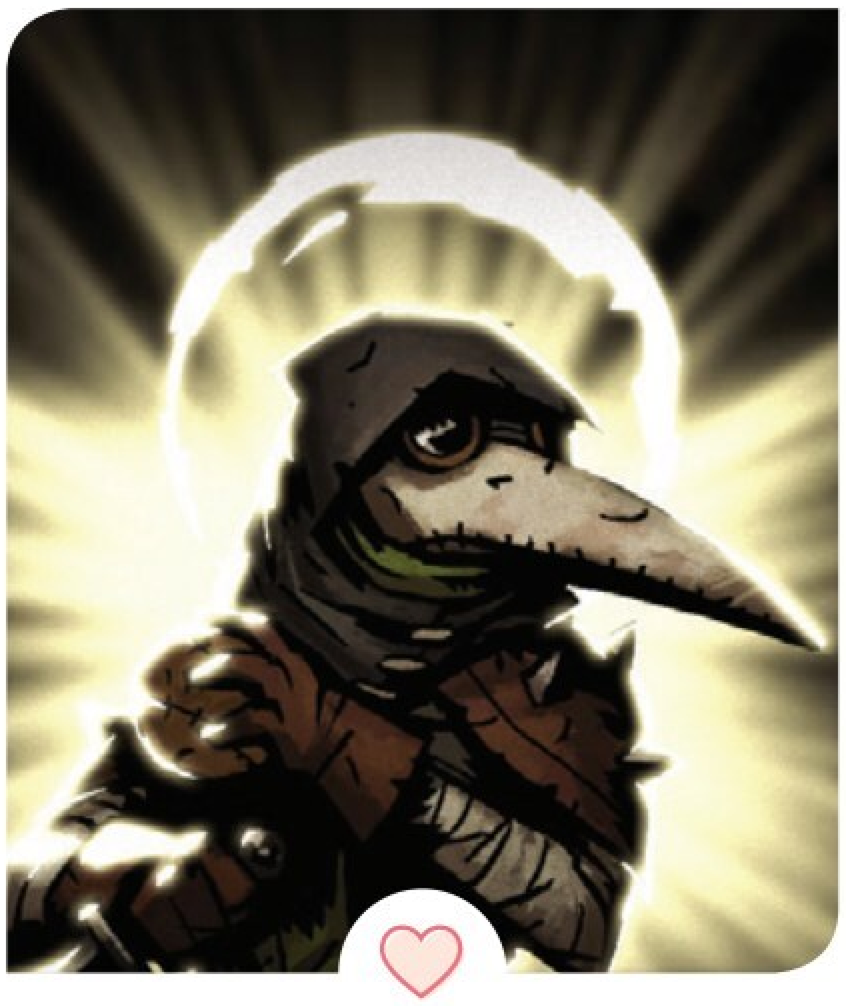
Kentucky Route Zero
This surreal, episodic adventure game follows a furniture deliveryman as he drives mysterious Kentucky roads and encounters odd characters. After a modest Kickstarter campaign back in 2011, Kentucky Route Zero is almost complete, with the fifth and final installment slated to release this year.

Star Citizen
Star Citizen's cosmically huge aspirations means it may never be truly "finished," but this ambitious space simulation is currently available in early access. Its community has pledged more than $200m to see what happens in Star Citizen's sprawling galaxy, making it the most-backed game in crowdfunding history.

Psychonauts 2
Despite previous success with Kickstarter, Double Fine used Fig to support the sequel to its cult-classic platformer. Expect plenty of psychic powers, offbeat humor, and strange characters. Psychonauts 2 is currently scheduled to hit sometime in 2020.

The Good Life
Developer Hidetaka "Swery" Suehiro turned to Kickstarter to fund The Good Life, a simulation/RPG that involves repaying debt and exploring a mysterious town where people turn into cats and dogs. This quirky adventure releases in spring 2020.

Factorio
What began as an Indiegogo campaign became an early-access simulation sensation. Factorio has you building and maintaining factories, collecting resources, and fighting off threats. Though Factorio has been in early access since 2014, look for version 1.0 in 2020.



Darkest Dungeon

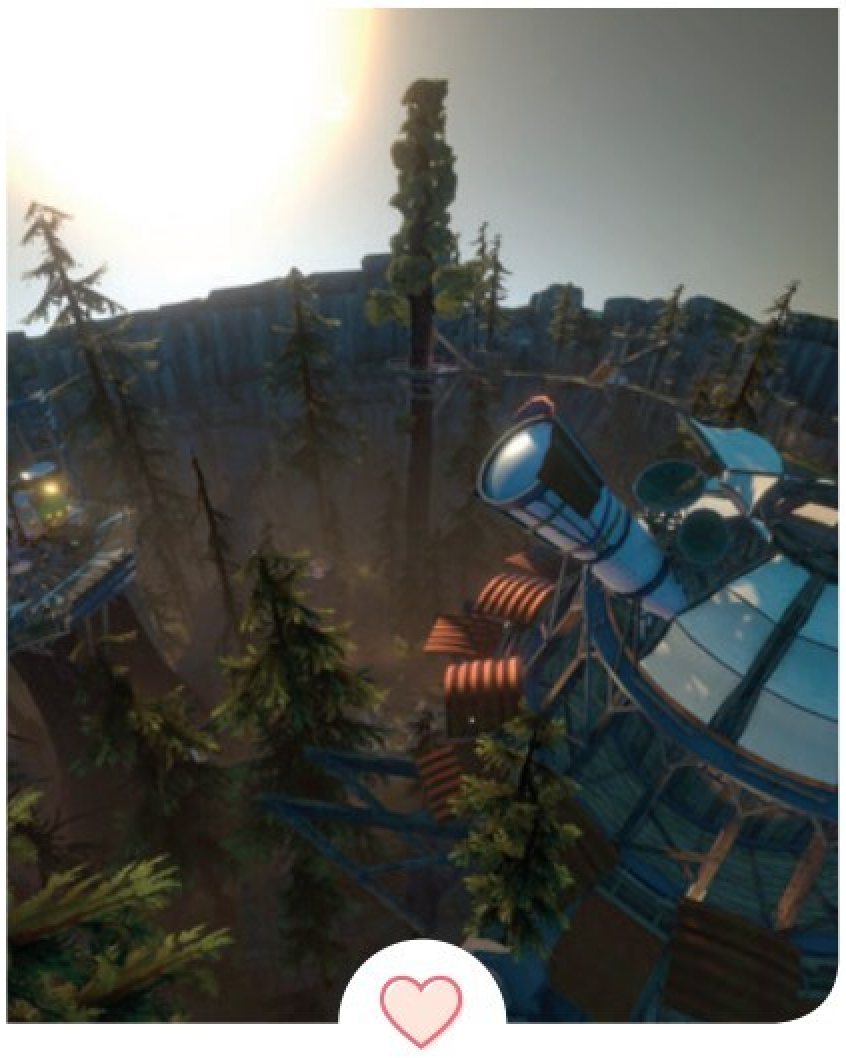
Pitch: Many RPGs have players plowing through dungeons and leaving with piles of loot. In Darkest Dungeon, the brutal turn-based combat ensures they also leave with the psychological trauma incurred by coming face-to-face with unimaginable evils.

Result: Players loved this unforgiving take on a traditional dungeon-crawler. The challenge was a big part of the appeal, with a focus on managing characters' mental states – not just gear. Red Hook Studios got $330k on Kickstarter to make this grim adventure, and its success means a sequel is in the works.

Pathfinder Online

Pitch: Pathfinder is a popular tabletop RPG similar to Dungeons & Dragons, making it a great fit for an MMO. Developer Goblinworks is focusing on freedom, creating a fantasy sandbox that removes the need for common genre barriers like grinding, classes, and griefing.

Result: An MMO is a huge undertaking, so it probably isn't surprising the Kickstarter's $1m was not enough finish the project. Though a playable version of the game is available, it falls far short of the experience the team aimed to create – and with only a skeleton crew remaining at Goblinworks, odds that Pathfinder Online will ever reach its potential are slim.



Outer Wilds

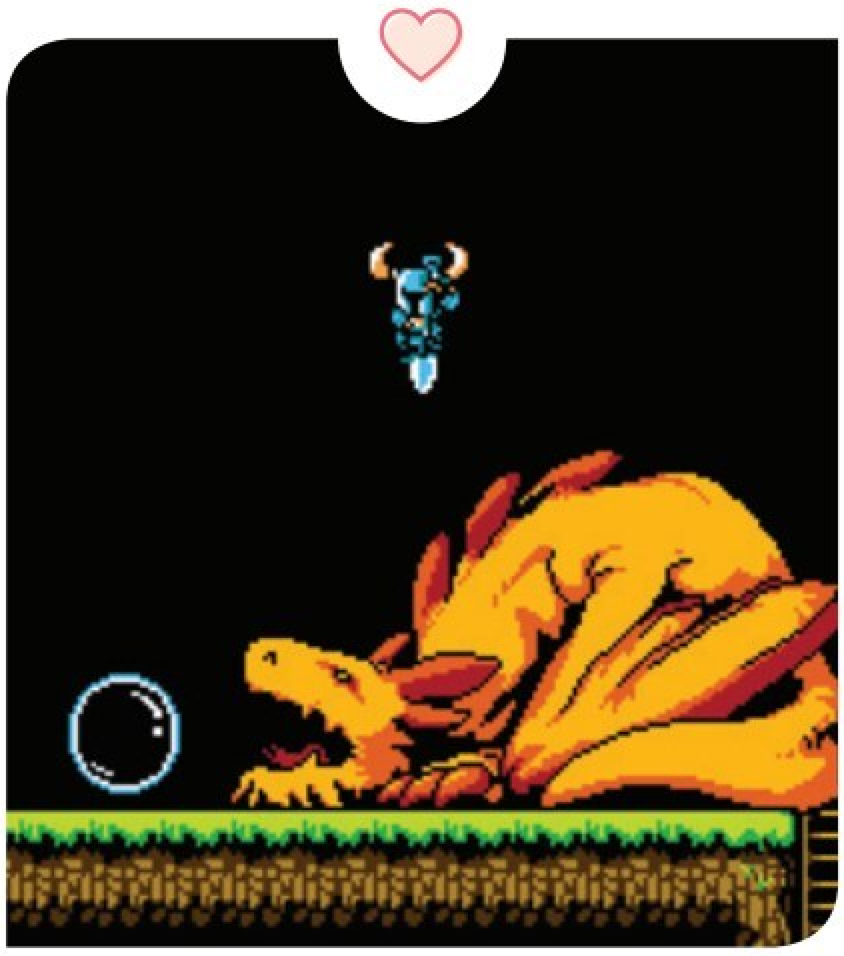
Pitch: Space is full of things that can kill you, but death isn't the end in Outer Wilds. Over the course of many lives, players explore a hand-crafted solar system in this time-looping, open-world, self-directed space adventure.

Result: Outer Wilds had already won the Seumas McNally Grand Prize at the 2015 Independent Games Festival, but as the first game funded on Fig, Mobius Digital raised $126k to finish it. Gamers enjoyed the free-form exploration and experimentation, as well as the overarching mystery.

Shovel Knight

Pitch: Action/platformers on the NES had a specific vibe – one that Shovel Knight harnesses by adapting ideas from classics like Mega Man and Duck Tales. From the old-school graphics to the chiptune soundtrack, Shovel Knight is a faithful throwback with modern touches.

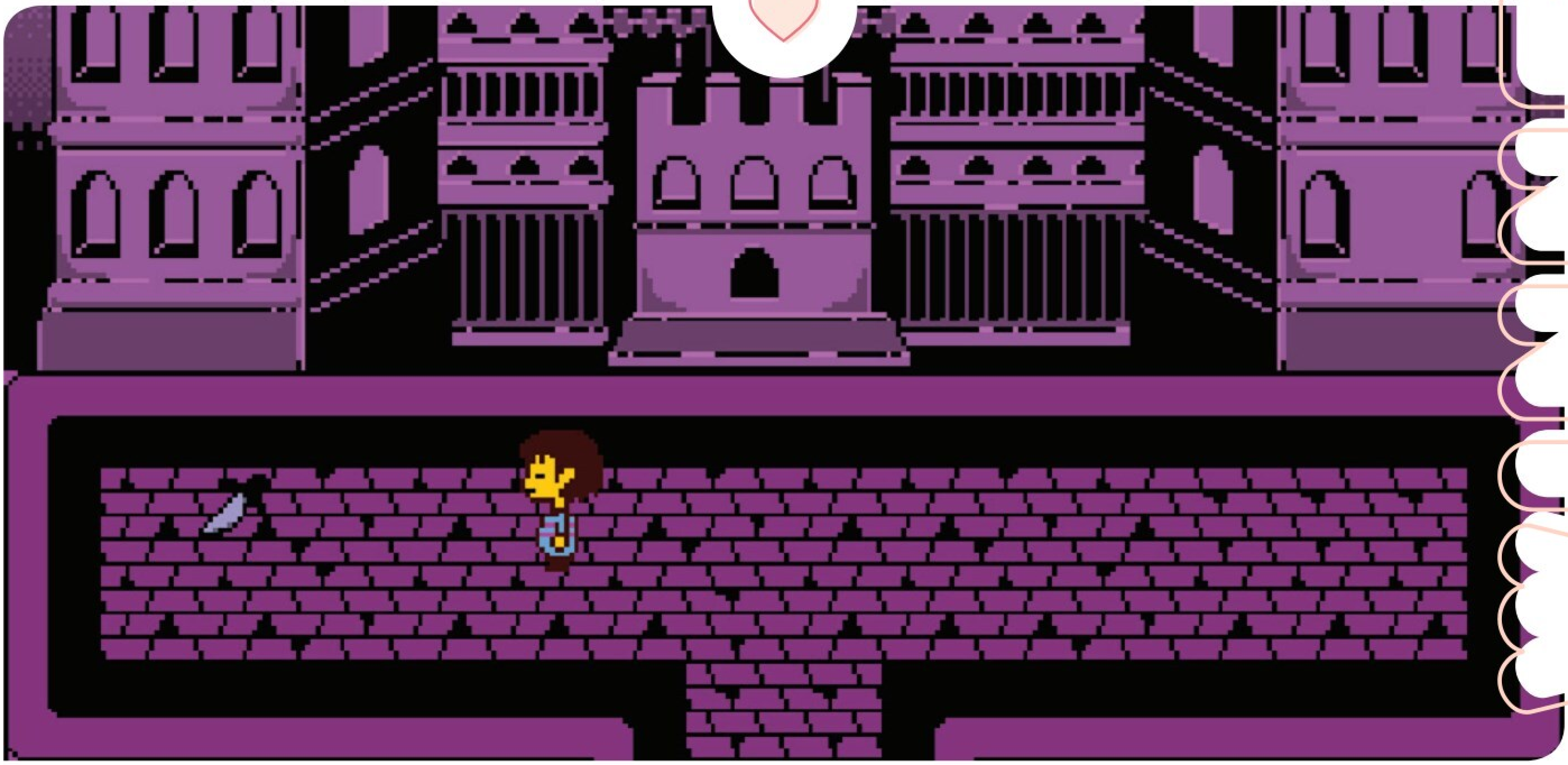
Result: Excellent levels, amusing characters, and lots of shovel-based action made this an indie darling. Also, thanks to the widespread acclaim (and the $311k Kickstarter), developer Yacht Club Games has developed multiple impressive new expansion campaigns since the base game's launch.



Undertale

Pitch: Undertale is a seemingly simple RPG with a sense of humor. Fight monsters or spare them as a lost child in a strange subterranean world, and meet with an array of colorful characters along the way. Pretty straightforward, right?

Result: This adventure subverted player expectations with surprising twists, meta commentary, and deviously clever battles. Developer Toby Fox raised $51k through Kickstarter, which seems disproportionately small compared to the outpouring of love Undertale has received since launch.



Ouya

Pitch: The traditional console market is ripe for disruption, and Ouya is the one to do it. This Android-based system is affordable, has free-to-try demos for every game, and allows independent developers to break into gamers' living rooms without relying on big publishers.

Result: The prime example of a failed success, the Ouya raised a spectacular $8.5m on Kickstarter. But the reality and the dream were too far apart; the game library was weak, the controller felt cheap, and the performance was sluggish. Once it launched, Ouya lacked the support to meet its lofty promises, with shipping delays and hardware issues driving the believers away.

Oculus Rift

Pitch: Virtual Reality was always cooler in concept than implementation, and Oculus wants to change that. Technology has finally reached a point that it can start delivering on the promise of VR, and the Rift developer kit is the first step to delivering a new wave of immersive games and interactive experiences to the masses.

Result: The Rift's 2012 Kickstarter campaign pulled in over $2.4m. This campaign undoubtedly had a major impact on the current state of VR, both in terms of demonstrating consumer interest and in the creation of experiences to showcase the possibilities of the hardware.

BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

Koji Igarashi gained acclaim with Castlevania: Symphony of the Night and its various sequels, and when he left Konami and the gothic franchise behind in 2014, we weren't sure what to expect from him. His Kickstarter for Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night inspired excitement, but Kickstarter projects are rarely guaranteed successes, even when they're fully funded. Thankfully, Bloodstained came together and features plenty of the elements we love about Igarashi Castlevanias while establishing an identity of its own. We spoke with Igarashi about creating the game. *by Kyle Hilliard*

Did development feel similar to making a Castlevania game? Or did the Kickstarter angle make it feel different?
Yes, it was very different. Kickstarter was also a reason for the change as well. With past projects, we changed many features of the game halfway through development. This time, we had a number of promises made from the very beginning, and the pressure to keep all the promises affected the development like no other project before. While it may sound obvious, leaving a huge company made me appreciate how many talented people work at a larger studio.

What was the most difficult part of making Bloodstained?
The most difficult part of making Bloodstained was the quality control. When you're working with an outsourced studio, it can be difficult to match the quality line when things change. With Bloodstained, we would first share our goal with the outsourced studio and make sure we both agree and determine the necessities, but even with proper planning it's difficult to reach. For that reason, there are times where we had to recreate certain parts of the game, which then takes more time to deliver.

There are tons of references to Castlevania, like fighting a reincarnated person named Richter and a vampire ally who looks suspiciously like Alucard. Were there any references that were cut from the game?
Hmm. You must be imagining …

Jokes aside, Castlevania is a series I respect and there are many inspirations taken from it. There is an enemy that I wanted to include which was heavily inspired from the series, but we had to swallow our tears and remove it due to technical difficulties. A very long and serpent-like creature.

Were you at all concerned that the initials of this game can be pronounced "Rotten" in English?
That's funny. I'm not good at English so I never realized, and even after you said that, I find it pretty interesting it could be read that way.

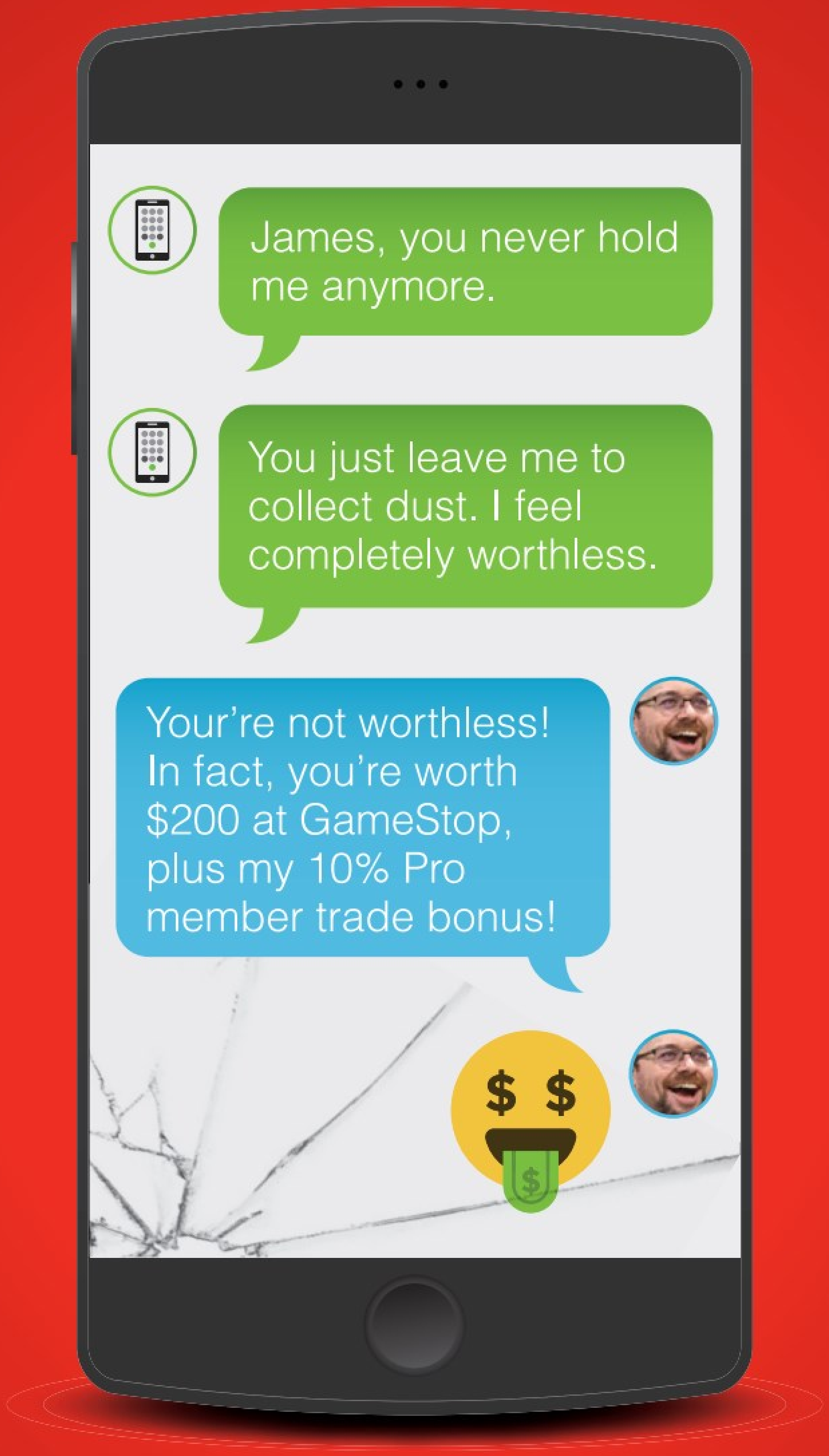
How do you approach pushing players in the right direction and giving them hints at where to go next?
We decided to set up a very obvious bad ending with a game-over screen. Our approach was for the players to get this ending first, and then have them return to the game realizing they need to explore the castle, collect and fill in the archives, look at the items, and thoroughly read through the texts to get to the right path. This was a similar approach we took in our earlier works and that's how we planned it for this game.

Was it exciting to hit stretch goals? Or did you dread the additional work?
I remember being really happy every time we reached a stretch goal. I didn't expect the fear that would come much later to haunt me …

The Switch port has experienced some difficulties. Were the platform's technical limitations more restrictive than you initially expected?
While there were concerns over hardware limitations, we didn't expect it to be as bad when it was released. Unfortunately, a number of problems occurred that we didn't foresee. With WayForward's support, these issues are being addressed and they are working hard to optimize the Switch version.

Do you plan to continue releasing more games in this style, whether it's a Bloodstained sequel or a new universe? Or do you want to branch out and try new genres in the future?
After the release of Bloodstained, I was able to prove that we can make this style of game without a large company behind us. We feel this game is the starting ground for the next step, so we have a strong desire to create a series of it after putting so much effort into the new IP.

Creating 2D side-scrolling action games is our strongest attribute, so we are also thinking about creating more games of the genre with different world settings. However, we also want to grow our company and it's not okay to keep doing the same kind of game. In the future, we plan to challenge all different kinds of genres as well.



James, you never hold me anymore.

You just leave me to collect dust. I feel completely worthless.

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Dark Themes Dominate In These Haunting Indies

Halloween is coming up, so it's the perfect time to delve into some of the creepier indie projects on the horizon. These two games are as different as can be in genre, but both draw on sinister concepts that set you loose in a bleak and unforgiving setting where heroism is hardly the central conceit. *by Matt Miller*

Blasphemous is a fascinating mix of hack 'n slash combat, Metroid-esque exploration, and world building and storytelling rooted in the tradition of Dark Souls. It's a heady brew that adds up to a uniquely twisted action/platformer, and after a couple hours of play, I'm bullish on the game's potential.

Right from the start, Blasphemous instills a sense of dread and discomfort. You control the Penitent One, an anonymous armored figure bedecked in an ominous and distinctive cone-shaped headpiece. As the game begins, you awake atop of a pile of bodies of similarly clad figures, and set out into danger. You wander through a world clearly inspired by some of the most twisted myths and historical elements of Catholicism, but the world itself is entirely fictional – a place called Orthodoxia. It's a place where religious zealotry is central to everything about life, and the majority of the populace has been mutated into horrific beasts as a punishment for their sins and lackluster worship.

Upon defeating an early boss, the Penitent One fills his helmet with the blood of his enemy before donning it again – my first hint that the game isn't shying away from some especially gruesome imagery, even within its immaculate pixel-art presentation. As I continue to explore, I'm impressed by the taut feel of the melee exchanges, and the wide variety of enemy designs, from red-clad flagellants with their whips, to floating wraith-like monks wielding the implements of sacramental ceremony. Even in the early hours, I'm surprised by the breadth of storytelling on offer, as numerous figures espouse their bizarre religious doctrines, which sometimes hide game objectives within their ranting.

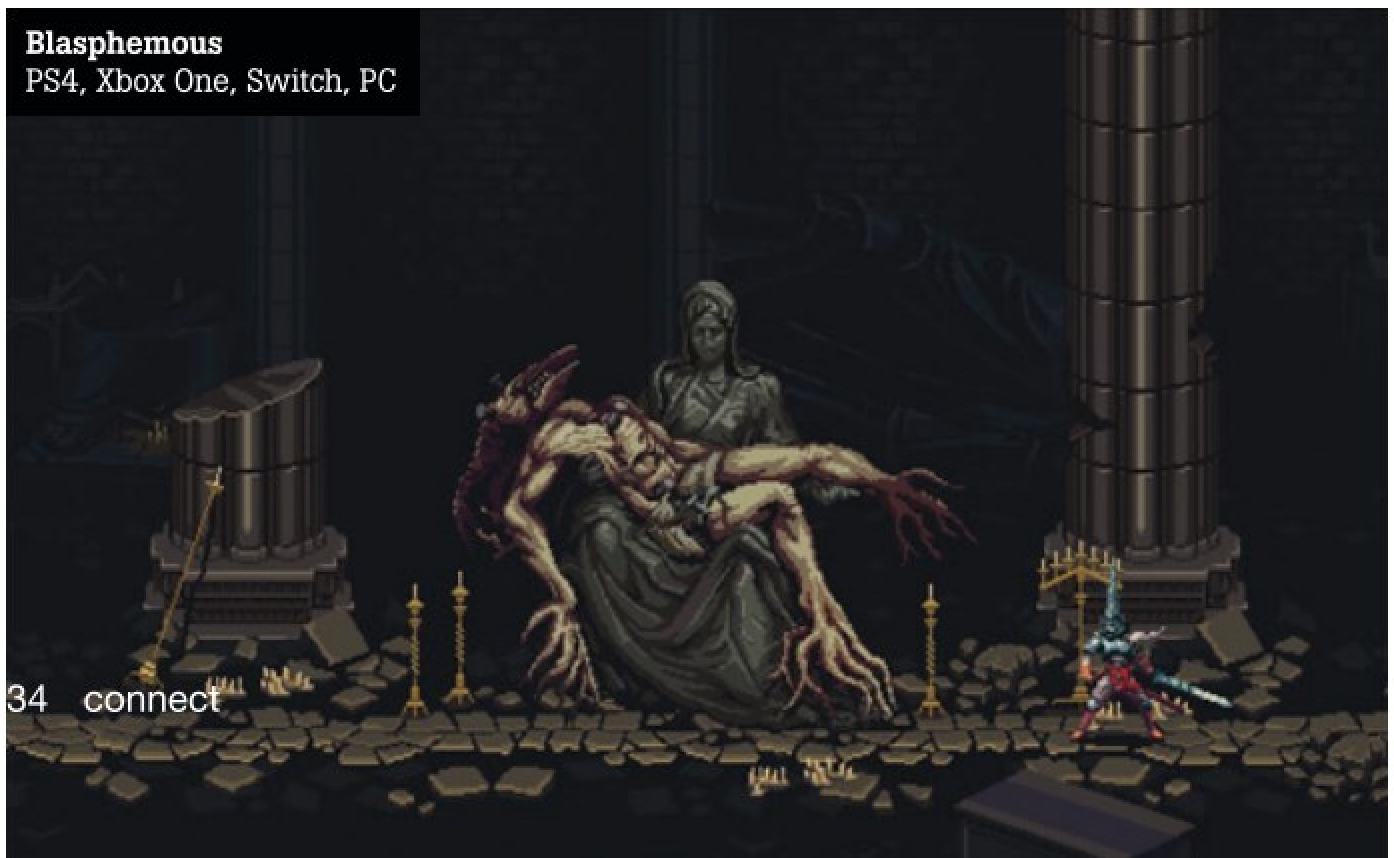
Blasphemous draws on some familiar wells for its progression and upgrade systems, but there's a lot of potential in those systems. Rosary beads can be equipped to change your character's capabilities. Die in your journey, and in the parlance of the game, you have erred in your penance, and leave behind a guilt fragment, reducing gains to in-game resources until you retrieve it. Overall, the game invokes some disturbing ideas, but at its core appears to be a thoughtfully constructed game of exploration and battle. I'm enthused to see the whole dark journey play out when The Game Kitchen releases the game on September 10 for PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC.

Iratus: Lord of the Dead makes no excuses for its similarities to another excellent strategic RPG: Darkest Dungeon. Anyone who has played that punishing project will immediately recognize a tremendous number of similarities here. While the degree of imitation pushes up to the line of being derivative, developer Unfrozen has a few tricks up its sleeve to set this villainous project apart.

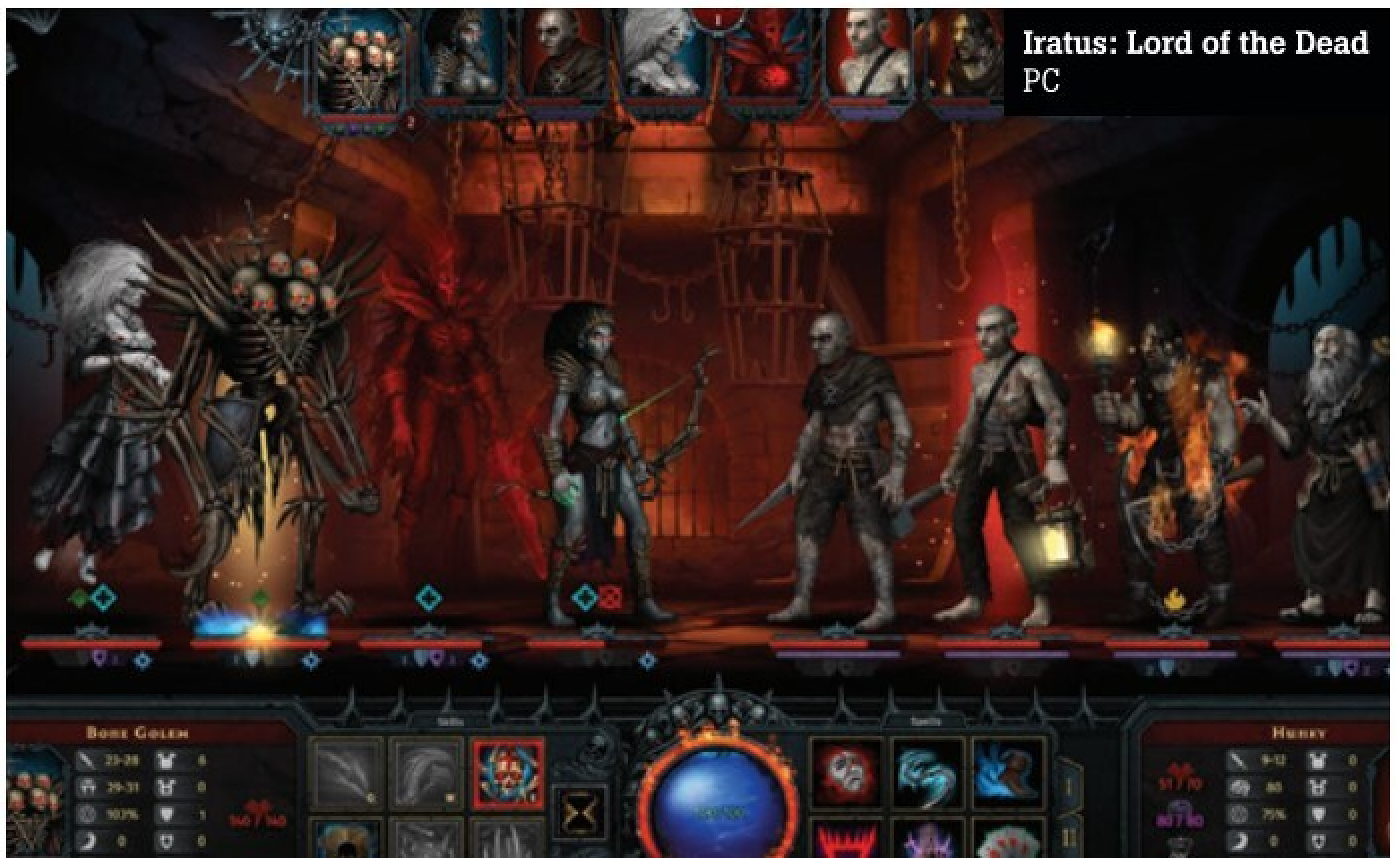
Chief among those differences is the narrative hook, which flips the script to put you in charge of the big baddie. You control Iratus, a revivified necromancer who has one more shot at conquering the world after being defeated hundreds of years earlier and left to rot in a sealed tomb. When he is inadvertently awoken by foolish miners, he sets to work killing those who have disturbed his eternal rest, and using their body parts as fuel to raise a new army of the dead.

Drop into battle, and the four-versus-four line-up presentation lets you know just how similar this is to Darkest Dungeon. Zombies, banshees, skeletons, vampires, and over a dozen other undead minions make up your army, and each individual levels up as you march them through the catacombs on your efforts to overtake the mortal surface world, even as you slowly build up your graveyard HQ with new structures. As you fight, rather than having your minions go crazy, you're actually inflicting stress on your enemies in an effort to drive them insane. Fights are all about smart ability selection and positioning, since different classes can target different slots in the enemy lineup. There's also some fun gameplay inherent to minion building, since you're literally slotting in different body parts, and some bones are just of a better quality than others. Iratus can also bring his substantial powers to bear in a fight, interjecting a devastating lightning blast or other effect into the battle to turn the tide.

Iratus: Lord of the Dead may tread some familiar ground, but its crisp art style, balanced (but very challenging) combat, and rogue-like structure are inviting and enjoyable. If you've thoroughly plumbed the depths of Darkest Dungeon, you could do much worse than trying on this necromancer's hat, as the game is available now in early access ahead of its spring 2020 full release.



Blasphemous
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC



Iratus: Lord of the Dead
PC

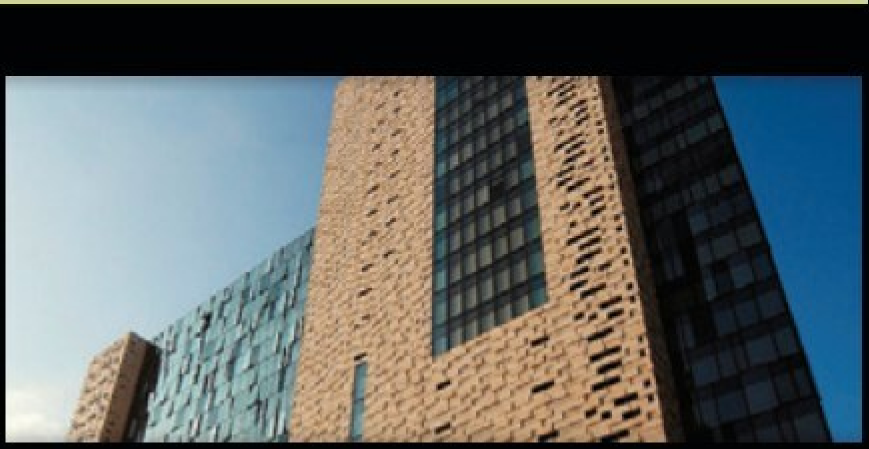
The Good

Industry lobby group and E3 organizer **THE ESA** (Entertainment Software Association) says that by 2020 the platform makers Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo, as well as big publishers such as Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts, Take-Two Interactive, Ubisoft, and others, plan to disclose probabilities for obtaining in-game items from premium loot boxes. Despite this self-regulatory step, the ESA does not believe that loot boxes necessarily constitute gambling.

The Bad

Fortnite streaming superstar **NINJA** recently switched from Twitch to Microsoft's Mixer platform in an exclusive deal. If Ninja leaving wasn't bad enough for Twitch, the company used Ninja's old username and channel to promote other streamers in his absence – with one streamer airing pornography. Twitch has apologized to Ninja for the incident, which has upset him given that he says he tried to get Twitch to shut down the channel when he initially left.

The Ugly



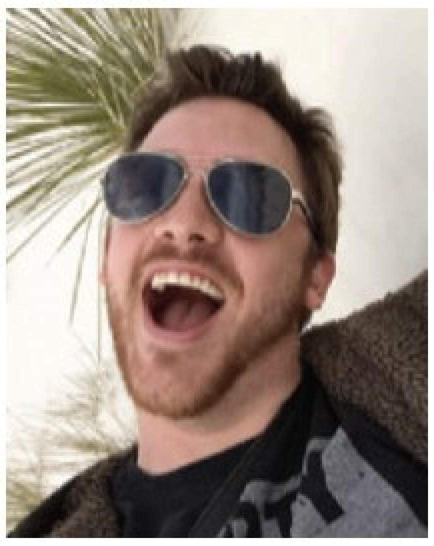
In the wake of mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Gilroy, California, not to mention an arson attack at Kyoto Animation, there has been a **SUSPECTED BOMB THREAT** at Bandai Namco's U.S. office, a **THREAT OF VIOLENCE** to the Twitch headquarters, and a **THREAT** to Square Enix's Japanese headquarters. The latter was perpetrated by a man who threatened the company with a recreation of the Kyoto arson because he was losing at a mobile game. The man was arrested for the threat, which he sent via an online inquiry form.

Quotable

"When you look at our IP library, we think there's a lot of IP in there the fans are going to want to experience again. I'd say stay tuned for some future announcements, but just beyond pure remasters, there are also a lot of opportunities now to innovate and think about totally new content within these IPs."

Activision president **Rob Kostich** on properties like Crash Bandicoot and Spyro.

PokéNatomy
Christopher Stoll



Spilling Pokémon Guts

One dedicated fan's journey to dissect Nintendo's beloved pocket monsters

Have you ever wondered what's going on inside your favorite – or least favorite – Pokémon? If so, you're in good company. Illustrator and former biology teacher Christopher Stoll has given a great deal of thought to what happens under the skin of our favorite pocket monsters. Stoll collected his observations, illustrations, and research – which was all based on real-world science – and created the unofficial guide *PokéNatomy*. We chatted with Stoll about the process for creating his book and how these exotic critters get their powers.

Name:
Christopher Stoll

Occupation:
Freelance artist

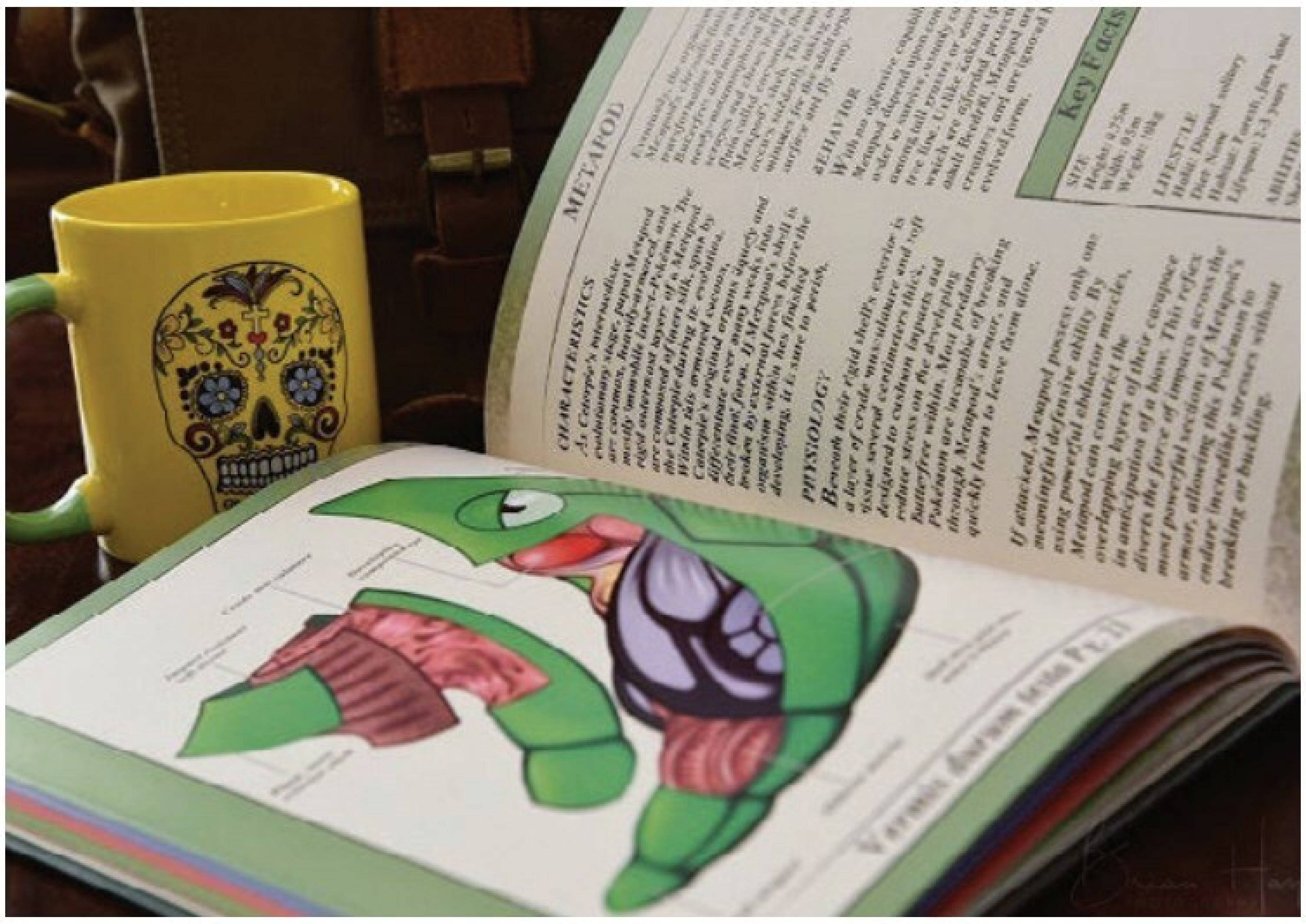
Twitter:
@TopherStoll

Instagram:
@TopherStoll

Etsy:
etsy.com/shop/
MultiverseBooks

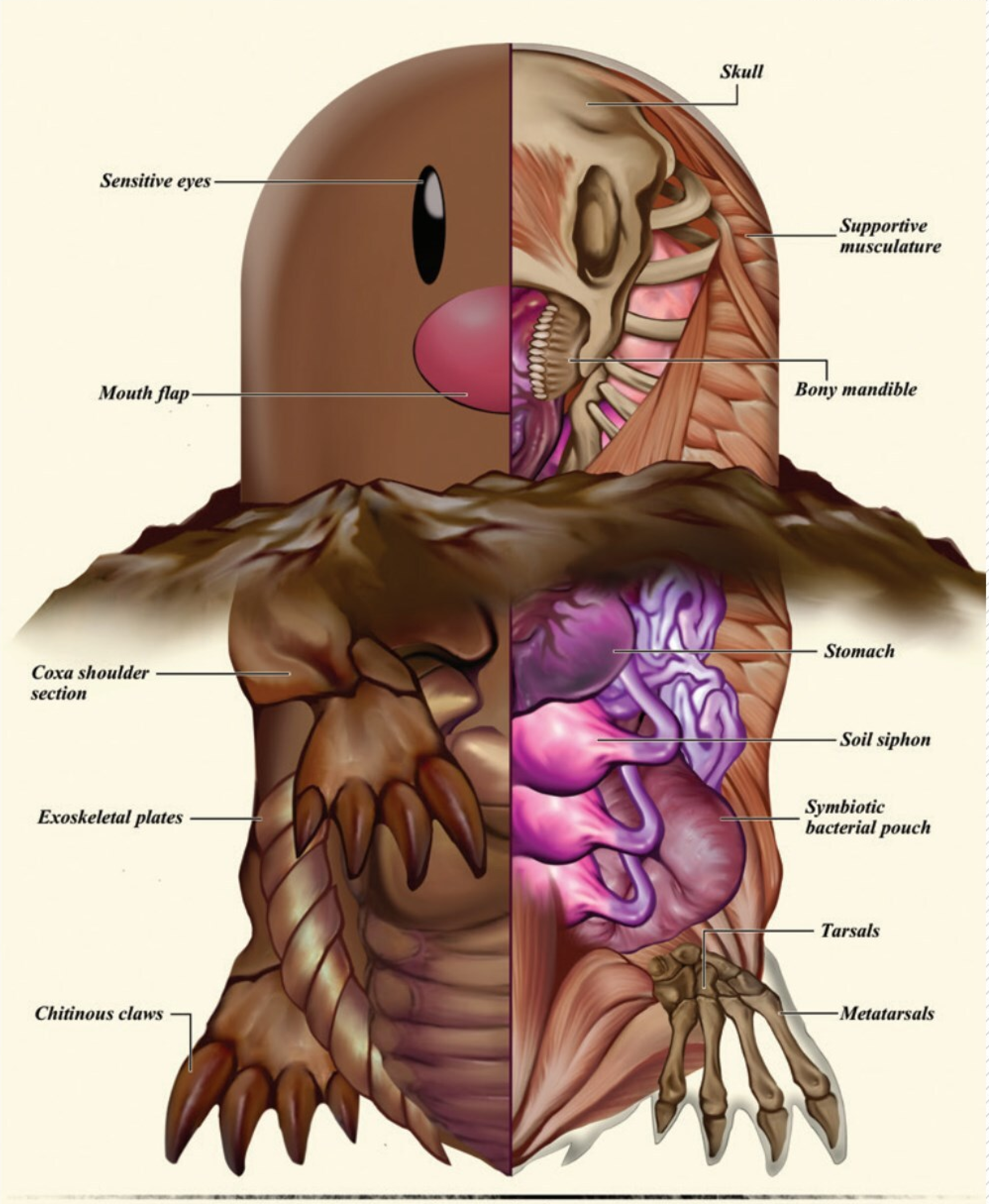
interview by Joseph Stanichar and Ben Reeves

What was the genesis of PokéNatomy?
My first book was a natural history of the fantastic, and that was more of a scientific guidebook to mythical creatures. So dragons, mermaids, trolls, goblins, unicorns. I studied biology in school, and I've always had this love for systems and the underlying mechanics of things, whether that's games, or storytelling, or machinery, or biology. I thought it was interesting to apply that scientific lens to something that is purely fantastical. That was the first book. Later on, I applied a similar lens to Pokémon, because I wanted to help kids and young teens understand body systems and explore biology through this interesting world.



Were you a big fan of Pokémon before this?
Oh, yeah. I was a huge Pokémon nerd. I think I was like eight or nine years old when Pokémon first came to the states, so I was at ground zero. I had no defense.

Pokémon are pretty fantastical creatures. How did you determine what was inside them?
I tried to keep the actual biology realistic wherever possible. Obviously, there's some fudges there, like psychic Pokémon or ghost Pokémon. We don't have good real-world analogs, but when it comes to something like Pikachu, obviously it's like a mammalian body, like a rat or a rodent, but it has these electrical abilities. So I look for a parallel in the real world. In that case it was electric eels. They have these networks of wafer-thin tissue that runs along the muscles on their sides, called electrocytes. And they basically shunt sodium ions to one side, almost like a battery, so they can produce an electrical discharge. I was able to take that existing system and place it in the body of a mammal to come up with this weird scientific approximation of a Pikachu.


Skull
Sensitive eyes
Supportive musculature
Mouth flap
Bony mandible
Stomach
Coxa shoulder section
Soil siphon
Exoskeletal plates
Symbiotic bacterial pouch
Tarsals
Chitinous claws
Metatarsals

Talpa defossus

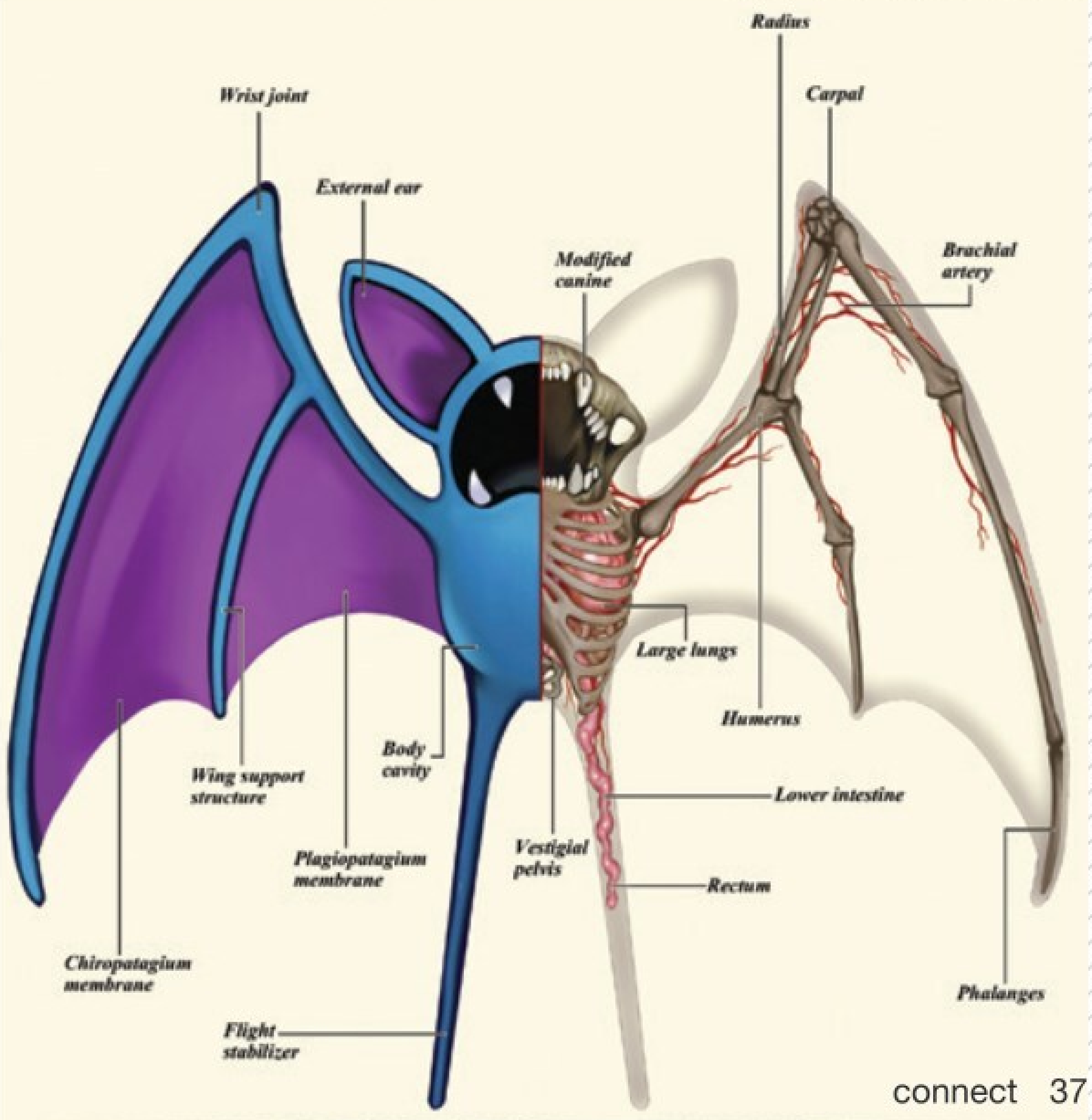
How involved was the research process for all this?
It varied from Pokémon to Pokémon. Some of them are very close to real animals. Ekans is just a snake for the most part, so if I'm doing that particular creature, I can just look up herpetology and translate one to one. But when it came to more complicated creatures, or more peculiar ones, there was usually an involved research process that preceded the illustration. For example, Paras' symbiotic or parasitic relationship with the fungal growth on its back. I looked at real-world examples of that, and how those two organisms might function in a realistic context. Usually, there was a substantial research process, even if the end result ended up being a peculiar synthesis of Pokémon canon and actual science.

Did you go into how Pokémon evolution works? Biologically, what is happening when they evolve?
I did. In the very beginning of the book. Pokémon evolution is more like a sudden metamorphosis. It's called evolution, but it's not like Darwinian evolution, like descent with modification. But it's implied, in the Pokémon world, that Darwinian evolution also takes place, because you have Alola forms, which are these speciations on an island habitat.

How much of this stuff is accurate to the official Nintendo Pokédex entries?
Wherever possible, I would stick to the official entry. There are definitely some departures, and in some cases I had to be willing to substitute biological reality into the gaps in Pokémon lore. Creatures like Grimer or Gastly are based on colonial organisms in the real world, such as slime molds, which are like the sort of protoplasmic sheets with a lot of free-floating nuclei. They don't have any central structures or any sort of organ systems, but they can still move and find food, and interact with their environment. There are actually some weird things in the real world that we can use for inspiration even for the most bizarre Pokémon.

Could you explain to me how Vanillite works? The ice-cream Pokémon?
I don't know. I'd have to really think about that one. I'd have to try and find some existing organism to base it on. It could be like, some sort of silicon organism that could live in a frozen state – although silicone would actually be better suited to like a fire Pokémon, because silicon bonds can only really form at high temperatures, so maybe like an ammonia-based organism that originated in extremely cold environments and has a completely distinct biochemistry from the rest of the Pokémon world. It would have to be an interesting thing that justifies how preposterous it is, but also kind of explores something that is theoretically possible.

What's next? Will you do Gen 2?
I'm putting out a book, a science-fiction book this summer, and it's going to be like this explorer's journal on an alien world. That's going to be hitting Kickstarter soon. And then I would really love to do a bigger and more substantial franchise. So like Star Trek, or Star Wars, or maybe Mario. Pokémon was the perfect match, because they're not totally out there. They're kind of like real organisms, so I might revisit Pokémon. It's all open-ended. ◆


Radius
Wrist joint
Carpal
External ear
Modified canine
Brachial artery
Large lungs
Humerus
Body cavity
Wing support structure
Lower intestine
Plagiopatagium membrane
Vestigial pelvis
Rectum
Chiropatagium membrane
Phalanges
Flight stabilizer

Vespertilio caeruleus

interview

Tackling Infinite Expectations

After the procedurally generated No Man's Sky launched amidst high expectations and confused messaging, Sean Murray was lambasted online and the team at Hello Games went dark. With multiple free updates to the game, the online community has since turned around and No Man's Sky is seen as a lesson in converting a game with a rocky launch into a success.

Going back to your start in the industry, what was your biggest takeaway from your time working at Criterion with EA?
When I started out, I never thought real people worked in the games industry. I thought gods or something did, right? Not real people. I got some offers from some really big studios that I really admired at the time, but there was this one really scrappy studio called Criterion. I know you've talked to co-founder Alex Ward a bunch before, and he's a real character. They had a really small studio at the time, it was 10 people on a team working on a game like Burnout 1. I saw that, and I had gone to other studios that were 200 people, but I saw that I was like, "This is what making games is." That's what I had assumed, it was a bunch of friends just making games. That really appealed to me, even though at the time Criterion wasn't really well known. Three or four years later when I left, Criterion had been bought by EA and Criterion was 350 or 400 people in these really nice offices. I can't explain it, but it wasn't what I had in my mind when I pictured making games. It's great that some people do that, it's amazing. It's incredible that Rockstar is two or three thousand people

working on a game, right? And it makes me laugh. I was looking at Red Dead Redemption II's credits and they have more people called Dave working on Red Dead Redemption than we have in our whole studio.

So the lesson was, "Let's do things with a small team?"
[Laughs] Yeah, you could just take all the Daves and they could just make No Man's Sky.

If you could communicate one message back to yourself at the start of No Man's Sky's development, what would you say?
I have thought about this sometimes. I think if I had explained to myself how hard it was going to be, I would have assumed that I couldn't do it. But actually, you can. I think that's been a really important lesson for me. There were so many times during development that I felt quite overwhelmed by it. That's the thing that I always talk about with the team. It's surprising what we're able to achieve with a small team. There's a load of assumptions that come into your mind that make you think, almost logically, "Well we can't do this because we're a small team." But it's amazing just how far we can get just through a mixture of stubbornness and stupidity.

The concept of the game was to make you feel small and humbled when compared to the scale of the universe, then the reaction toward the game inflated your ego and made you a huge deal. What was that like to be on the inside of trying to have a mission for your game while the public is creating the opposite effect for you personally?
Yeah, that's probably quite astute. When we first showed it off, and I'm sure you got the sense from us, we were totally overwhelmed. I think most people would look at the game and say, "Of course people were going to get hyped about that!" But that was the furthest thing from my mind. I was showing off something that I felt people would look at and laugh about or say, "You know, that's quite a niche game, or quite a weird idea" or whatever. We'd had months of that before we showed it off for the first time. People found it a bit weird or a bit niche. I think it was a relief to announce the game, and sort of a relief to do things like E3 and see people really excited about it. But I think generally, you probably know this from chatting to me during those years, it was largely just scary to us. It was a bit crazy. A bit of insanity rather than necessarily enjoying that inflation of ego, right?

What do you think is the strangest part of the entire journey for No Man's Sky's development?
I think No Man's Sky Next was a really inspiring moment. I don't think that will be obvious to people outside of the studio, but we were incredibly nervous before the release of Next. It had been a year, and it's hard to remember this, but we were still very much in the firing line at the time. From where I was standing, we were still getting a really hard time. I'd assumed we would put out Next, and it would do okay and people would be done with No Man's Sky. But it was pretty bizarre, it sold a few million copies and broke a bunch of records on concurrent player numbers. I was really surprised given the journey that we had. I thought we were done with really weird surprises or people getting hyped about the game or whatever. It was so strange to have one last arc in the story for us.

It seems like the industry's takeaway from No Man's Sky's development is that if a game did not hit expectations, keep your head down, stick with it, work on it, and you might be able to save it. You might be able to pull a "No Man's Sky." But when is a game not worth saving? Do you worry that the message doesn't apply to everybody and it could be disastrous for some developers?
I don't know necessarily that we're a good role model. I don't know that we necessarily have the answers or anything. I know that, for us, we could see that people were really enjoying the game. There was a lot of noise, a lot of noise about what is often industry-wide problems. Things like preorders, games being overhyped at E3, the pricing of games, releasing too early because you're trying to hit a release slot, or things like that. A lot of that noise I kind of agree with a bunch of it, but can't change as a small developer. But when you cut through that noise, for us at least, we could see a group of people who actually really loved the game. They were often angry with us, but were angry with us because they wanted more, they wanted that game to be better. They wanted it to be their one game that they played. That really helped us. Once we realized that and once we locked on to that, that was a super helpful thing. That's not necessarily going to be true of every game, but for us it wasn't just some altruistic thing. It was, I'm not going to say an easy thing, but it certainly made things a lot easier to see, "This person is complaining to me about something in the game that really annoys me too!" And if that was fixed, they'd play it much more. That just seemed a much more straightforward thing. I'm not saying it was necessarily fun to have people be angry at me or anything like that, but once you cut through it there were a lot of people who had things that we felt like we could fix and that they really wanted to enjoy the game.

Do you see No Man's Sky Beyond as the final big, named package update for the game?
No, we don't. I don't want to guarantee what we're going to do in the future, but at the moment we're still really excited. I'm working on something else in my spare time, but for the team No Man's Sky is something we really enjoy.

Now that No Man's Sky Beyond has shipped, are you personally going to move from part-time to full-time on that new project?
No. I think No Man's Sky came into being whilst we were developing Joe Danger. It was me working on it in my spare time. Joe Danger came into being because I was working on that in my spare time before we started Hello Games. That's just the weird little guy I am, that making games is my hobby as well. I think I'll drag more of the team into it if I convince them that what we're doing is a good idea and things pick up momentum. But No Man's Sky is a big part of us.

You don't think the team is convinced yet that it's a good idea?
Well … I think that you know about as much as what a bunch of us do about what we do next. We're not good at planning. We just kind of roll with things.

"Procedural generation, something something, it'll amaze you."
[Laughs] Yeah, something like that. ◆

No Man's Sky Beyond

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2001
Graduated from University College Cork with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science

2001
Joined Criterion Games as a junior programmer and worked on Burnout 3 and Black

2007
Co-founded Hello Games with Grant Duncan, Ryan Doyle, and David Ream in Guildford, England

2010
Shipped Hello Games' first game, the side-scrolling stuntman action game Joe Danger

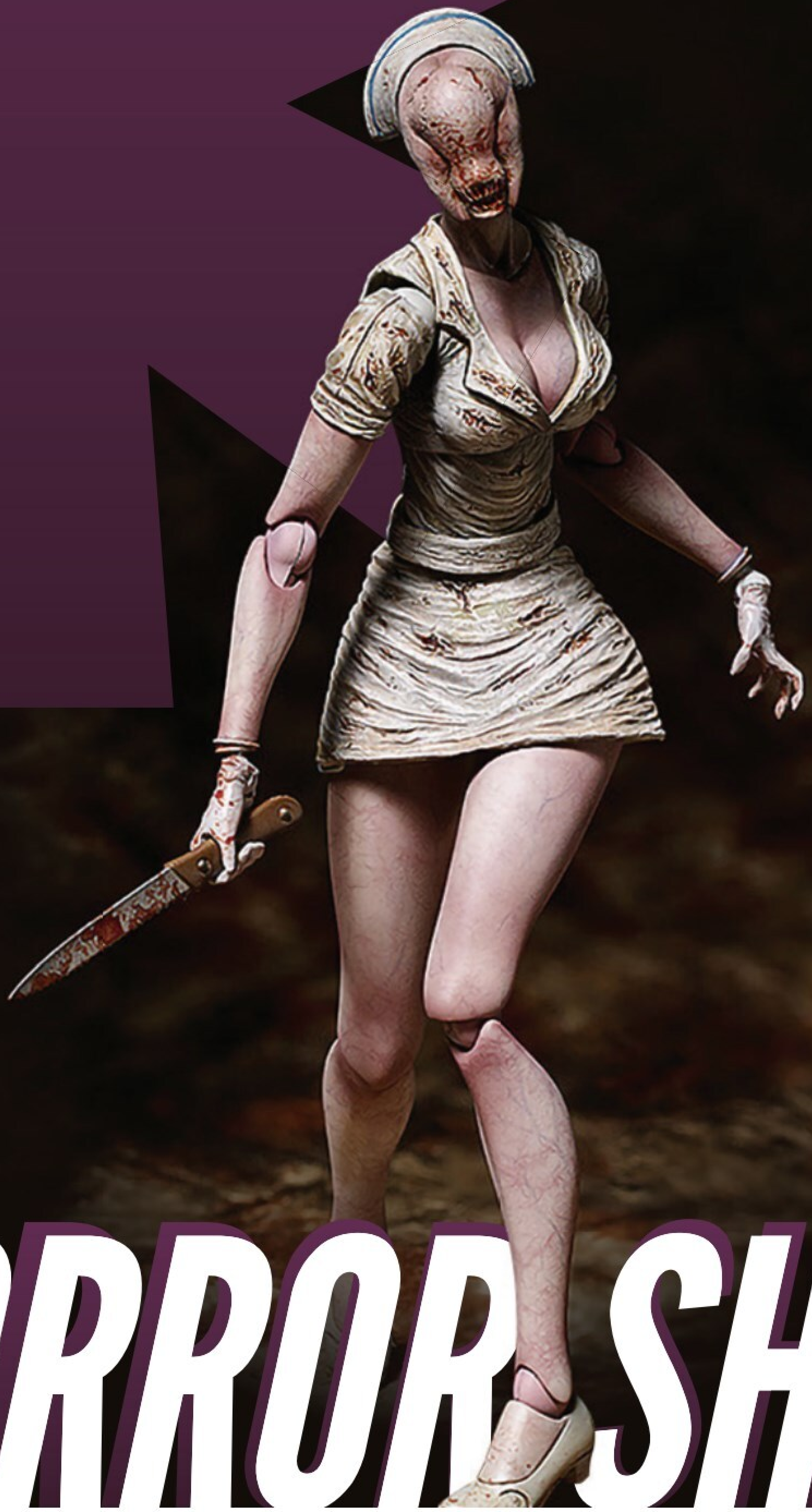
2013
Revealed No Man's Sky during the VGX Awards alongside Geoff Keighley and Joel McHale

2014
Game Informer launched our cover story for No Man's Sky in December, featuring a rapid-fire interview filled with promises

2016
No Man's Sky shipped on PC and PlayStation 4, creating a firestorm of debate online about broken promises

2018
After three substantial updates, No Man's Sky Next launched as a large free update that added multiplayer

2019
No Man's Sky Beyond launched and added full VR support, expanded multiplayer for 16-32 players, and more



HORROR SHOW!

Gaming gear to haunt your nightmares

by Ben Reeves

1 Silent Hill Figma Bubble Head Nurse

Think toys are supposed to be fun? Try laughing in the face of this figure. Silent Hill 2 is nearly two decades old, but its iconic nurses are the reason we don't like going to the hospital. This 6.8-inch posable figure from Figma is so eerily realistic that it sends chills down our spines.

$54.99 | **goodsmile.info/en**

2

2 Resident Evil 2 Replica Raccoon City Police Station Keys

Your shotgun has run dry and you are nearly out of healing herbs. You just want to find a place to rest and catch your breath, but the undead are relentless. Around the corner you find a door but it's locked. In that moment, you hear moans moving down the hall. If only you had a key…

$35.99 | etsy.com/shop/DimensionWshop

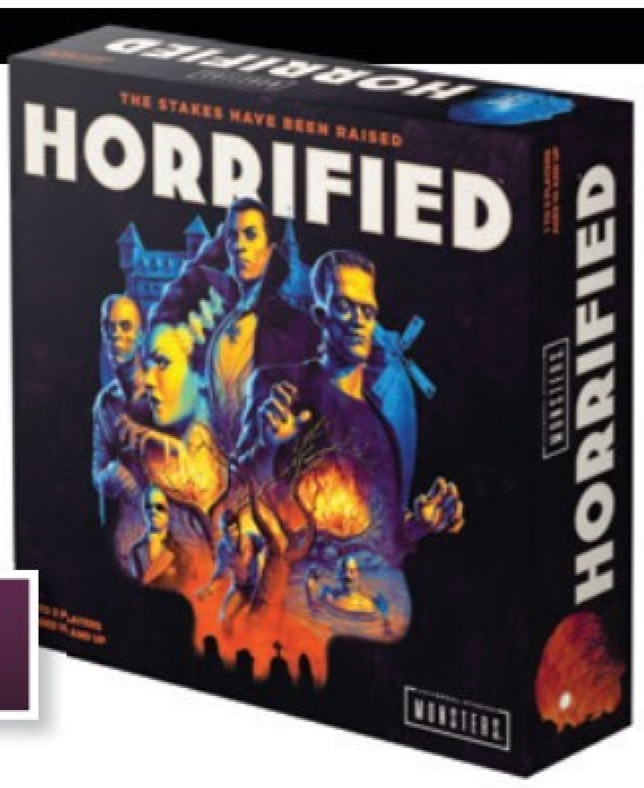
NECROMANCER
Restore the Balance

3

3 Diablo Necromancer Pullover Hoodie

This lightweight pullover hoodie might be made from the withered skins of Diablo's demonic minions, or it might be a cotton polyester blend. Either way, you'll look stylish as you tear through the hordes that swear allegiance to the Lord of Terror.

$45.00 | gear.blizzard.com



4

4 Horrified Board Game

One to five players cooperate against the forces of evil in this easy-to-learn board game. Players work together to rid the unfortunate town of the likes of Dracula, The Mummy, The Invisible Man, and The Bride of Frankenstein. Each monster (represented by a detailed miniature) has its own unique abilities, and difficulty scales with the number of monsters on the loose in each session. ◈

$34.99 | ravensburger.us

Media Shelf

MIDSOMMAR
T. KINGFISHER
THE TWISTED ONES
THINGS FROM THE FLOOD

MIDSOMMAR

After facing a cataclysmic family tragedy, Dani travels with her boyfriend to a secret Swedish midsummer festival. But their idyllic holiday slowly turns into a sinister nightmare. From director Ari Aster (*Hereditary*), this psychological horror film is unsettling from start to finish.

$24.99
a24films.com

THE TWISTED ONES BY T. KINGFISHER

When a young woman named Mouse begins to clear out her deceased grandmother's home in rural North Carolina, she discovers more than she bargained for. Buried under piles of hoarded rubbish are dark secrets about a hidden life and a strange colony of creatures in the woods.

$24.99
redwombatstudio.com

THINGS FROM THE FLOOD

Take on the role of brave teens in a twisted version of the 1990s in this RPG sequel to the stellar Tales from the Loop. Giant robots twisted by Lovecraftian corruption meet the angst and horror of adolescence to provide awesome narrative hooks.

$43.99
modiphius.net

top ten

CHAINSAW-WIELDING MANIACS!

by Jeff Marchiafava

Leatherface

Various

Movie characters don't usually land the number-one spot on our top 10 lists, but we can't argue with Leatherface. Not only is he the progenitor of all chainsaw-wielding maniacs, he's also starred in myriad games, from Atari's Texas Chainsaw Massacre to Mortal Kombat X. Hold your chainsaw high, Leatherface. You deserve it.

Dr. Salvador

Resident Evil 4

Whether he has an actual medical degree or not, Dr. Salvador is a pro at performing cephalectomies on Leon, as many exasperated players can attest. His ability to shrug off gunfire and land one-hit kills isn't just terrifying – it also sets the tone for the more action-focused adventure to come.

Adam McIntyre

Dead Rising

If "Adam McIntyre" isn't ringing a bell, you probably just know him as the surprisingly spry clown chasing you around Willamette Mall with dual chainsaws. From his disturbing laugh to his gruesome death sequence, Adam stands out as one of Dead Rising's most memorable psychopaths.

Piggsy

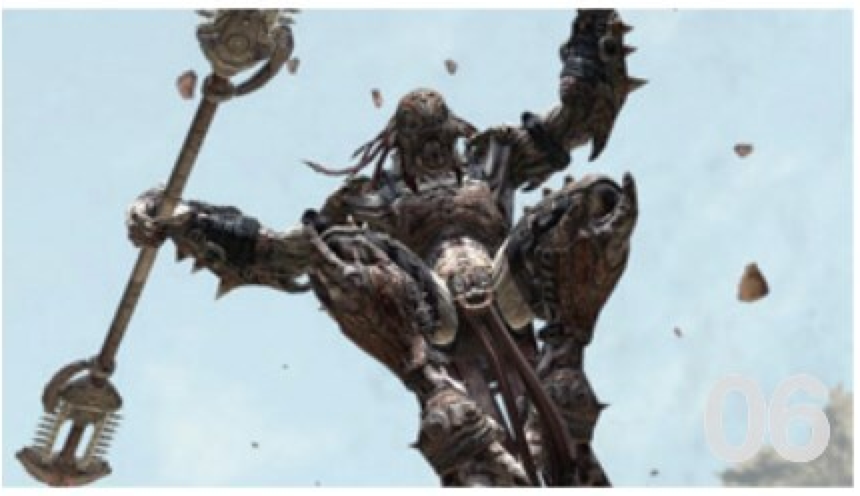
Manhunt

How do you make the chainsaw-wielding archetype even scarier? Strip him naked and shove his head in a rotting pig face, of course. Piggsy's animalistic appearance and history of abuse would almost make you feel sorry for him – if, ya know, he wasn't always trying to kill you.

Sadist

The Evil Within

Technically every character on this list is sadistic, but The Evil Within's Sadist really drives his predilection for pain home – mainly by driving his chainsaw through Sebastian in a number of blood-geyser-inducing ways. Does anyone take chainsaw safety seriously in video games?



Skorge

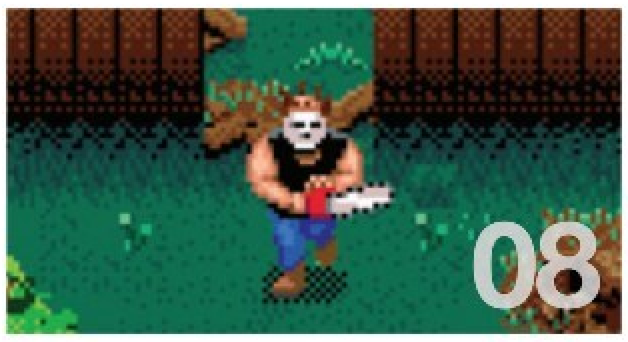
Gears of War 2

COGs aren't the only ones wielding chainsaws in Gears of War. Skorge, the high priest of the Order of Kantus, had his own take on the technology, in the form of a dual-bladed staff. A Troika heavy machine gun seems way more efficient, but who are we to judge?

Chainsaw Elite

Zombie Army Trilogy

Just when you thought the Nazis couldn't get any worse, now they've got chainsaws – and they don't even have the decency to stay dead! Chainsaw Elites are particularly vexing, thanks to their ability to soak up multiple headshots before going down. That's basically kryptonite for snipers!



Stanley Decker

Zombies Ate My Neighbors

Sure, Stanley Decker draws inspiration from the wrong movie slasher and his name is a playful spin on the leading chainsaw manufacturer. He still elicits his share of dread in Zombies Ate My Neighbors' cartoony world, however, thanks to his ability to plow through walls with ease.

Biggy Man

Splatterhouse

Imposing size? Check. Burlap sack over the head? Check. Chainsaws for hands? Check. This mutant boss certainly meets all the criteria of a chainsaw maniac, but let's face it: He'd be a much biggy-er threat if the game didn't give you a shotgun right before you run into him.

Scrake

Killing Floor 2

Even in a game full of abominable freaks, Scrake make an indelible impression on players – and not just because they're hygienically conscious enough to don a face mask and apron before going about their business. It's more the giant, buzzing saw of death they're waving around. ◆

October2019

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 01
- Roman Rumble in Las Vegum: Asterix & Obelix Xxl 2 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Yu-No: A Girl Who Chants Love at the Bound of This World (PS4, Switch)

Friday 04
- Ghost Recon Breakpoint (PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC)

Friday 11
- Grid (PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC)

Tuesday 22
- The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III (PS4)

Friday 25
- Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- MediEvil (PS4)
- The Outer Worlds (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶

Tuesday 29
- Resident Evil Triple Pack (Switch)
- Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz HD (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)

Thursday 31
- Luigi's Mansion 3 (Switch)
- Moons of Madness (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 04
- Joker (theaters)

Sunday 06
- Batwoman (CW)
- Supergirl (CW)
- The Walking Dead (AMC)

Tuesday 08
- The Flash (CW) ❷

Thursday 10
- Supernatural (CW)

Friday 11
- The Birch (Facebook)
- Charmed (CW)

Tuesday 15
- Arrow (CW)

Friday 18
- Maleficent: Mistress of Evil (theaters)
- Zombieland: Double Tap (theaters)
- Jojo Rabbit (theaters)

GAMER CULTURE

Sunday 01

Overwatch: The Official Cookbook

Have you ever wondered what Mercy and Reaper eat after a night of competitive play? Of course you haven't, but now you can cook up some of their favorite meals through the official Overwatch cookbook. Along with dishes that are themed after the look of the characters, each of the 90 recipes is tied to Overwatch's lore. No, we're not kidding. You can make the milkshake that Soldier: 76 grew up with on the farm.

Thursday 04

New York Comic Con

Held in the Javits Center, New York Comic Con is the biggest pop-culture convention on the east coast. Over 250,000 people are expected at this year's show and will be engaging with various activities for movies, video games, anime, and more. This con has traditionally been one of the best places to go for cosplay.

Friday 04

SHUX

SHUX, also known as the Shut Up & Sit Down board game convention, kicks off in Vancouver today, and gives showgoers the chance to dive into a library consisting of over 1,000 games. More than 50 publishers will also be on hand with their newest products.

Wednesday 16

X-Men ❸

Jonathan Hickman's wild new take on the X-Men concludes this month in the issues of House of X and Powers of X. Fans don't have to wait long to find out what comes next. Hickman is continuing his story in X-Men, a new monthly series that focuses intently on Cyclops and his vision of the future for mutantkind.

Friday 18

Portland Retro Gaming Expo

If you want to learn about the games of yesteryear, Portland's long-running Retro Gaming Expo offers a sprawling arcade, classic consoles with hundreds of games, and panels with developers and streamers. This show also features a retro auction known for delivering plenty of oddities and rare games.

FEAR THE WOLVES,

DREAD THE DRONES

In **GHOST RECON BREAKPOINT**, Ubisoft throws everything it has at its special operatives

by
MATT BERTZ

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Shooter
(8-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

» DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Paris

» RELEASE
October 4

TECHNOLOGY HAS NO MORAL COMPASS.

How the tools meant to improve and augment our lives are used is ultimately determined by their possessor. The same satellite technology that enables Uber and Lyft drivers to pick us up and drive us to our destinations can also be used by governments to spy on their own populations. Airplanes bridge the divide between countries, bringing businesses and cultures closer together than ever before. They are also occasionally highjacked for dastardly acts, like the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Artificial intelligence and drone technology are one of the newest horizons for scientists and engineers. The flexibility of this technology is remarkable. Drones can deliver packages, defuse bombs, and even pollinate flowers to stand in for dwindling bee populations. When the United States loses contact with the biggest manufacturer of advanced drones in the world, you can understand the subsequent panic and dread that consumes the military branch tasked with anticipating worst-case scenarios and offering corrective measures.

Determined to find out what happened and squelch any potential threat, the military calls on the elite Ghost Recon unit to investigate. The mission proves to be the ultimate test for their advanced training, pushing the unit to its breakpoint.

Breakpoint features a tiered loot system, but UX and realization director Matthew Tomkinson says this wasn't done just to artificially inflate the number of weapons in the game, but to push players to try different weapons and playstyles

REIMAGINING GHOST RECON

For the past two decades, the Tom Clancy brand has served Ubisoft well. The Rainbow Six and Ghost Recon franchises solidified the French publisher as one of the leaders in tactical shooters, and expanded efforts like Splinter Cell, H.A.W.X., and EndWar took the brand in interesting new directions with varying degrees of success. The ever-widening catalog of Clancy games led to Ubisoft's 2008 decision to purchase the best-selling author's name for use in video games in perpetuity, and shortly thereafter the publisher began envisioning new futures for the biggest Clancy brands. Splinter Cell gravitated more toward a Jason Bourne-style action-infiltration fantasy, while Rainbow Six evolved into a multiplayer-focused tactical hero shooter.

After the release of Future Soldier in 2012, Ubisoft charted a bold new trajectory for Ghost Recon as well. The series had an entrenched battalion of fans who enjoyed its future-focused tactical play and it reviewed relatively well, but none of the games ever broke through to the sales stratosphere where military shooters like Call of Duty and Battlefield regularly landed. Leveraging publisher expertise honed with series like Assassin's Creed and Far Cry, the Ubisoft Paris studio began working on a new design that transposed many of the best qualities of the earlier Ghost Recon games – advanced technology, sync shots, cooperative campaigns, methodical play that encourages a tactical approach – onto an expansive open world.

Set in a near-future Bolivia, Ghost Recon Wildlands tasked new Ghost leader Nomad and his squad with dismantling the Mexican drug cartel holding the impoverished nation hostage. The giant map spanned nearly 80 square kilometers, featured 11 different biomes ranging from dense jungles to barren salt flats, and allowed up to four players to go anywhere at any time, completely untethered. The freedom enabled great tactical variety, and the formula worked in raising the Ghost Recon profile. Wildlands was the seventh best-selling game of 2017, and now has 15 million registered players. The game continued to draw new players as Ubisoft supported the game post-launch with free additions like the Ghost War multiplayer suite, permadeath Ghost mode, and special missions featuring the likes of Splinter Cell hero Sam Fisher and the Predator.

Ubisoft doesn't have to stray far from the Wildlands formula to strike gold again – Breakpoint still offers a four-player cooperative tactical experience set in a massive open world – but the new game also distinguishes itself in several important ways. First, it's the only game in the Ghost Recon family to move away from grounded geopolitical skirmishes, a decision likely hastened considering the blowback the French publisher received regarding its characterization of Bolivia from the South American country's government following the release of Wildlands. Second, Breakpoint embraces more elements of survival games to make life rougher on the Ghosts. And third, the game is built from the ground up to continually receive new content across its campaign and competitive multiplayer modes, including the introduction of the first Ghost Recon raid. Ubisoft intends to support this game well past its launch day.

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

For its next mission, the Ghosts aren't driving a cartel out of a country, tracking a weapon of mass destruction across international borders, or preemptively squelching a coup. Instead, they've been summoned to find a civilian.

Jace Skell isn't just any civilian. He's the billionaire visionary leading Skell Technology, a powerful Silicon Valley outfit known for blazing new trails in artificial intelligence and machine technology. Skell formed his company after winning a DARPA competition with a long-range surveillance-drone prototype, and made a fortune supplying militaries with drone technology, including the Fourth Echelon, Rainbow, and Ghost Recon teams. After his wife died in the September 11 attacks, Skell rejected the world of violence, withdrawing all his military contracts and purchasing the South Pacific archipelago of Auroa to build a new Skell Technology headquarters.

This was no mere corporate park; Auroa became Skell's vision of a utopian, self-sustaining society where humans and technology intermingled at every level. The brilliant scientists and engineers on the island worked on grandiose plans to build drones that help to eliminate food shortages, heal the sick, and erase poverty, but when a terrorist attack destroys one of the research buildings and kills 30 of his employees, Skell comes to a harsh realization: Though he tried to escape the brutal cycle of violence engulfing the rest of the globe, he cannot live outside it and instead must fight it. From this point forward, Skell Technology rekindles its relationship with the CIA and starts constructing a variety of weaponized drones. He also hires the Sentinels, a private military contractor formed by a former Ghost named Trey Stone, to maintain security at Auroa.

When the U.S. government suddenly loses contact with Auroa and Skell, it assumes the worst. Skell may have the best intentions for his fleet of high-tech drones, but put in the wrong hands this tech could be repurposed for more nefarious deeds. Did the Sentinels go rogue? Did Skell? Is someone else pulling the strings on the island? The Ghosts are sent to Auroa to clandestinely investigate why the island went dark and locate Skell.

Whoever took control of the island knew the Ghosts were coming. On the descent, the chopper carrying the special-forces team is hit by drone fire, killing everyone but Nomad. The grizzled combat veteran (and your three compatriots, if you are playing cooperatively) is left to his own devices, with no oversight, actionable intelligence, or supplies.

The island the Ghosts land on is a far cry from the utopian ideal it was founded upon. The Sentinels operate autonomously across the island, limiting civilian movement and guarding secure Skell Technology locations. This PMC group is no pushover, with a wider array of enemy types than we saw in Wildlands. Fortified locations have armored minigunners, rocket gunners, snipers, and breachers armed with blinding flash grenades and shotguns on the premises.

Many of the stronger new specialists have armor that makes them tougher to take down, but don't expect a level of bullet sponginess on par with The Division when fighting human enemies. As long as an enemy isn't wearing a helmet, you can always take them out with a clean headshot. Just make sure your shot counts, because the enemies are also smarter than the Unidad and cartel members in Bolivia. If you're not careful about marking enemies with your drone before infiltrating a base, you can find yourself in a sticky situation where snipers have you pinned, a minigunner is flanking you, and the breachers are charging your location.

The Sentinels also have increased awareness for dealing with stealth attacks. If the enemy becomes suspicious, they may investigate the area where they thought they heard or saw something, alert the camp to increase their awareness, or call for reinforcements. They don't just automatically know where you are, however. The investigating enemy needs to spot you before opening fire, so if you remain hidden you can still get the jump on him. And if one person's cover is blown, that doesn't automatically mean they know the location of everyone else in your squad. They can preserve their stealth advantage.

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From the first time you launch Breakpoint, you can go wherever you want in the Auroa archipelago. Ubisoft decided against locking players out of region based on their level so exploration isn't discouraged

THE DENIZENS OF AUROA

Skell Technology only recently purchased the archipelago of Auroa, but the region has a long history of settlers dating back to when European traders first discovered the land in 1875. Over the years, it became a key strategic military asset for keeping surveillance over the South Pacific region. Americans maintained bases here during World War II and throughout the Cold War, and some of those soldiers stayed behind. Others splintered from from Jace Skell's utopian project to carve out their own future. This ecosystem of societies gets caught in the middle of the hostile takeover of the island, many of whom the Ghosts cross paths with in Breakpoint.

The Homesteaders

THE HOMESTEADERS

Mads Schultz is one of the Marines who stayed behind on Auroa after his tour of duty in the mid-'90s. After being discharged, rather than returning stateside he set up an idyllic society of likeminded people who wanted to break the shackles of society and live off the grid. They largely kept to themselves when Skell Technology arrived to transform Auroa, but now that the Sentinels have the island on lockdown, their way of life is being threatened. To escape the oppression, the Homesteaders have relocated to a cavern called Erewhon.

THE OUTCASTS

Not everyone on Auroa buys into Jace Skell's idea of a utopian society. Some of his staff and a group of native islanders grew disillusioned with his leadership and think a changing of the guard is necessary. This collective, led by a young woman named Haruhi Ito, moved off the mainland to the Windy Islands to plot a revolution. Their fight hit a significant roadblock when the Sentinels started patrolling the island, but they nevertheless persist in fighting for their cause.

THE LOANERS

Ubisoft came up with a huge backstory for the Auroa archipelago, and you can learn all about its rich history by meeting different characters who offer unique missions unrelated to the main storyline. The search for a missing friend of Mads Shultz will lead you to a series of Cold War installations where you can learn about how the Americans used the island to monitor the Soviet threat. You may come across the granddaughter of a Japanese kamikaze pilot who crash landed on the island and assist her in finding out more about him. Another may lead you to a shipwrecked Spanish galleon and tell the story of the treasure-happy pirates who once called the island home in the 17th century.

FACTION MISSIONS

Ubisoft plans to continue the story of the Homesteaders and Outcasts well after the conclusion of the campaign through a new Faction Missions system. Every day, players receive new missions they can complete to help these groups. "We want the players to be able to play endlessly, so there are parts of the faction missions that are procedural," says UX and realization director Matthew Tomkinson. "But there are also other ones that are handcrafted, with a degree of narrative and cinematics. It's like the same quality as the missions that you get when you play the main story. So the idea is really that is that you are helping different factions in the game and you're getting rewards for that."

Episodic in nature, every two weeks a new handcrafted faction mission continues the story. They also introduce you to new faction characters. For instance, one Outcast operative may need your help to stop Sentinel propaganda and raise awareness among Skell employees about what's really happening on the island. Other faction missions may require you to free a faction member from captivity, gather valuable resources, or sabotage Skell operations. Many of these missions were designed to take you to new locations not used for the main storyline, so they are a great way to indulge your inner explorer.

Completing faction missions earns you weapons, resources, XP, and the battle currency you can spend to unlock new things like weapon skins, outfits, face paintings, and CQC takedowns. A dedicated menu will present everything you can unlock during the two months each episode lasts.

The Outcasts

TOURING AUROA

Breakpoint's setting may be fictitious, but Ubisoft spent a lot of time making it seem real

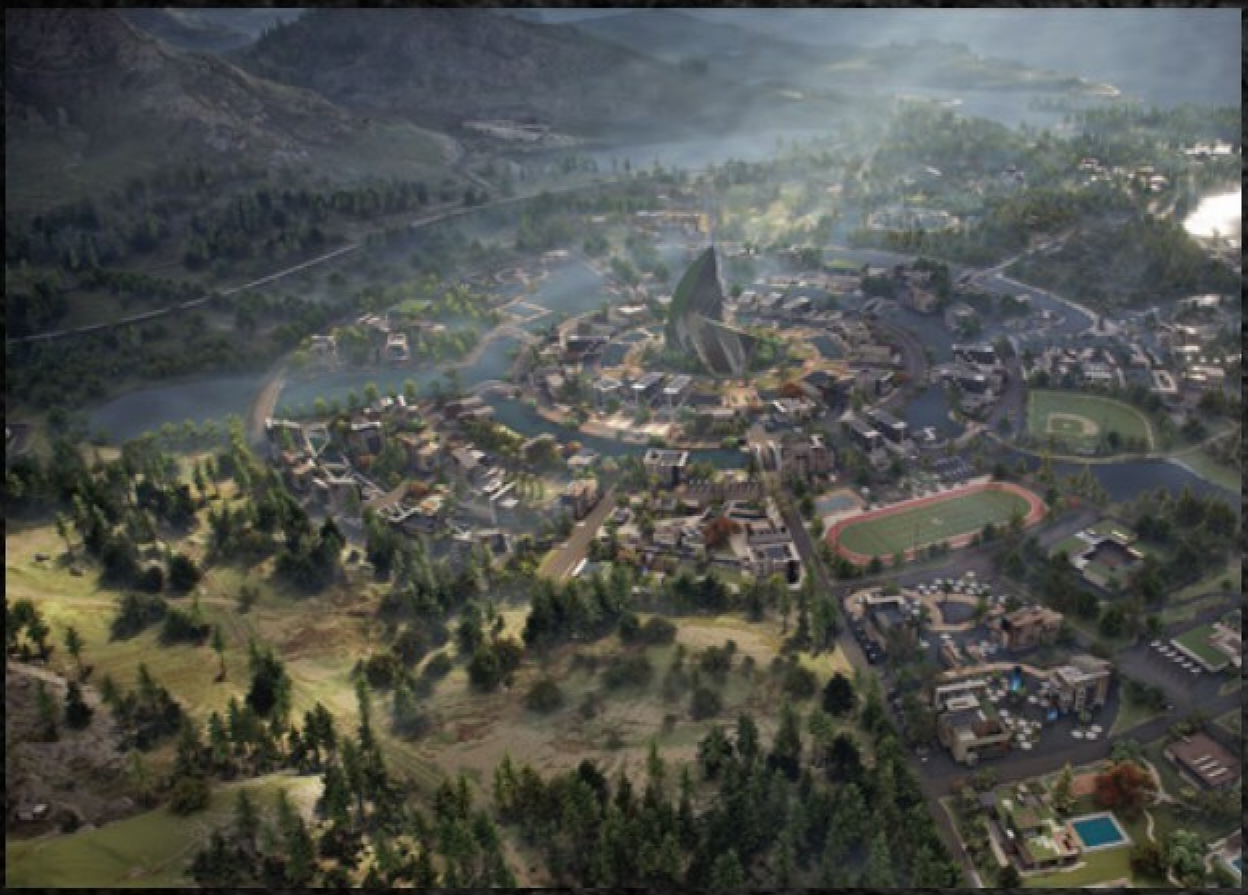
Ubisoft threw longtime Ghost Recon fans a major curveball when it announced the latest game in the series wouldn't be set in a real country. Instead of heading to the latest region embroiled in a global showdown, Ghost Recon Breakpoint instead transports players to a fictitious archipelago in the South Pacific known as Auroa. The decision wasn't made lightly, but Ubisoft is confident that adopting a fictitious setting was the right call.

"Creating a fictional setting gives us immeasurable license to expand on the world," says writer Emil Daubon. "So everything from technical constraints, you might find a specific geographical location, we can create a variety of terrain to engage with. We can create a variety of physical and social landscapes that you have to navigate, and we can expand on it as we choose. That's a really exciting aspect. When we're trying to tell a story, we find that we are less limited, because we have created a fictional environment that is still grounded in reality, and in a very plausible 'What if?' scenario. So while the setting is fictional and the characters are fictional, the question that remains behind the story is still palpably real."

Creating its own setting also solved one of the major problems that developer Ubisoft Paris faced when transitioning from Wildlands to Breakpoint – finding another location on Earth with the types of sweeping vistas and diverse biomes that made Bolivia such a standout setting.

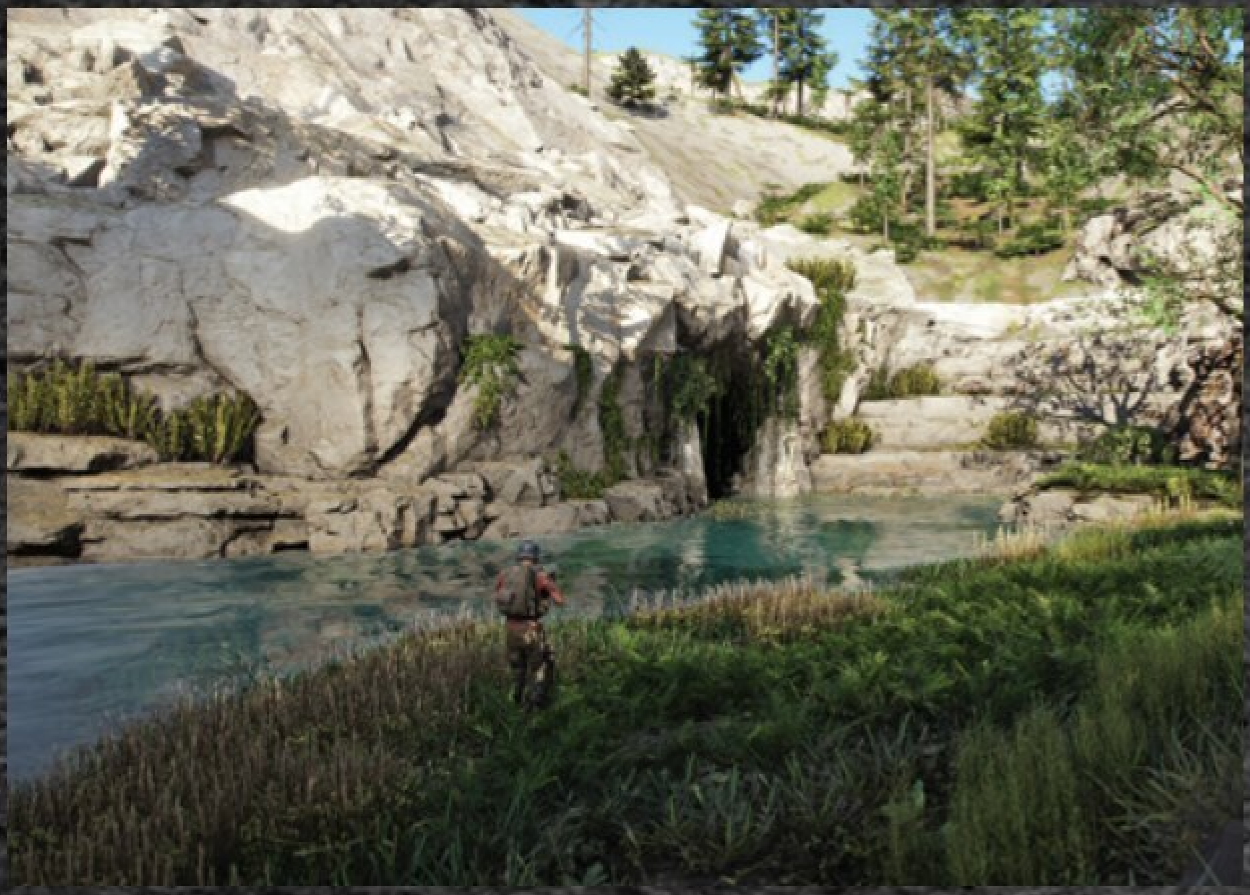
"We were quite happy with this idea of completely controlling the design of the game, including the landscape, and not just sticking to reality and trying to recreate existing vistas," says lead artist and technical art director Benoit Martinez.

Building Auroa from scratch allowed Martinez and his team to pick and choose the geographic elements of the archipelago, and the results are stunning. We took a tour of the island's ten different biomes to take in the sights.



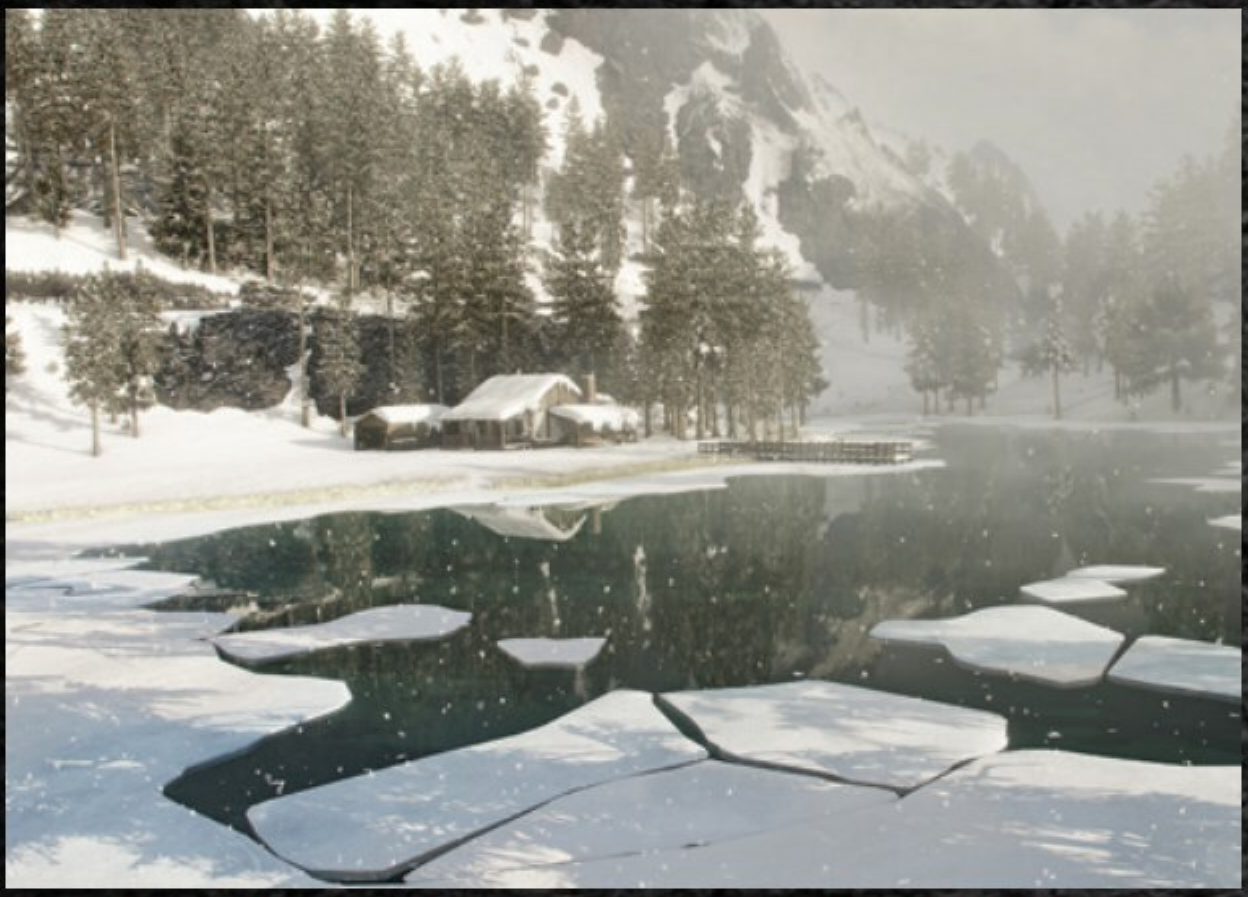
LIBERTY

Liberty serves as the Skell Technology headquarters and the centerpiece of Jace Skell's "World 2.0" utopian concept of a self-sustaining, eco-friendly city



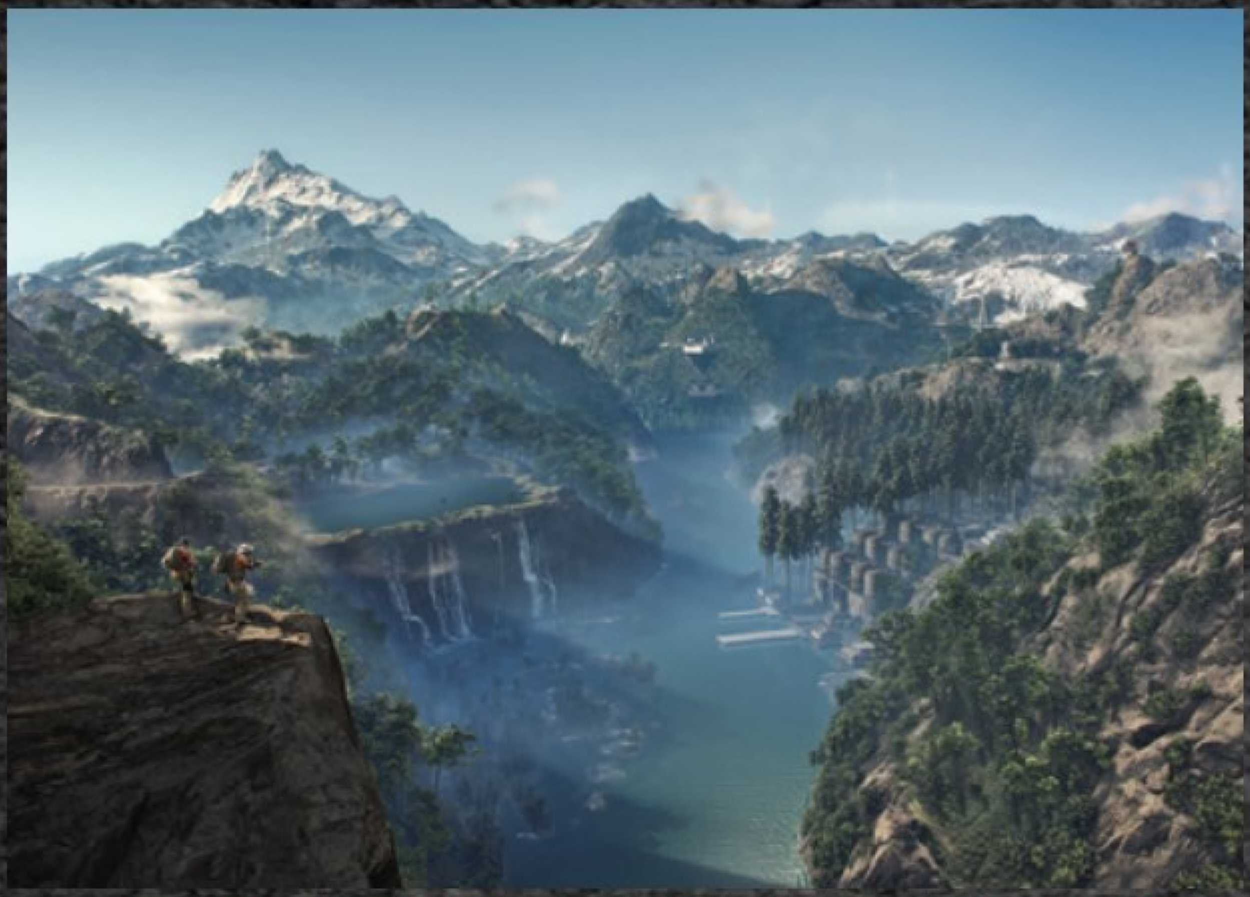
AUROA UNDERGROUND

Auroa has an extensive network of caves running throughout the main island



SNOWY TERRAIN

Snowy regions provide different tactical considerations than the rest of Auroa



FORGOTTEN CIVILIZATIONS

Ancient ruins from a forgotten civilization can be found around the archipelago

RAINFOREST

The new foliage technology allowed Ubisoft to create more realistic rainforest regions

ROBINSON HIDEOUT

You will run into off gridders who have called Auroa home well before Skell Technology arrived

SKELL RESEARCH FACILITIES

A variety of high-tech Skell facilities can be found around Auroa, like this state-of-the-art data center

LOST TREASURES

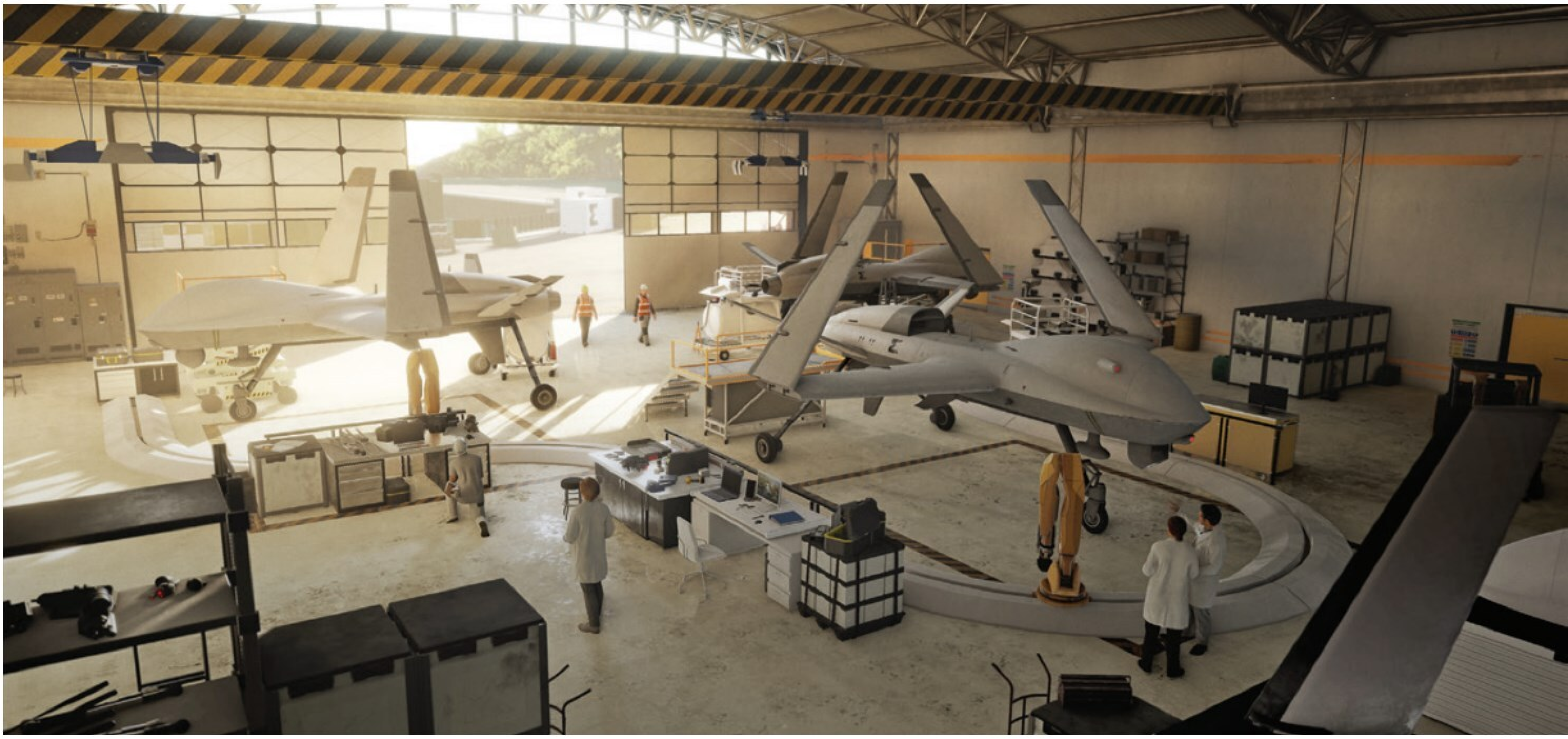
Shipwrecks and other points of interest pepper the shorelines

ADVANCED TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS

Auroa has a variety of transportation modes, including highways and two train systems

WAR RELICS

Remnants of World War II battles and Cold War structures tell the stories of Auroa's fictional past



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SHADOW PREY

The Ghosts are used to being the undetected hunters tracking their prey, but in Breakpoint they have targets placed firmly on their backs from the moment they step on the soil of Auroa. Anticipating the U.S. response to the loss of contact on Auroa, whoever's in charge hired a group of former special forces operatives known as The Wolves to seek out and extinguish the Ghosts. The Wolves are led by the fearsome and charismatic Cole D. Walker (played by *Punisher* actor Jon Bernthal). Wildlands players who completed Operation Oracle are already familiar with Walker. During that mission, Nomad is tasked with tracking down a Skell Technology engineer suspected of sharing company secrets with Unidad. When Nomad crosses paths with his fellow Ghost in the middle of the mission, Walker's already gone rogue to some degree, suspecting the CIA of being involved in the spread of Skell tech, which eventually led to two of his comrades getting gunned down by a militarized drone.

Operation Oracle wasn't Walker's first rodeo operating off the grid. He once belonged to a wetwork outfit nicknamed the Retaliation Team, which often took justice into its own hands without government oversight. The group was eventually disbanded, and Walker re-joined the Ghosts, but he left the group after his confidence in his government employers deteriorated. He then built his own private force of former special operatives from across the globe who were equally dismayed at the self-serving nature of their leaders. With capes and masks, these Wolves look threatening, and should be feared.

"The Wolves are depicted in the game as a shadowy menace that appears when you never expect it," says narrative director Denis Brusseaux. "Most of the time you see Sentinel soldiers, who are patrolling everywhere, checking IDs, and guarding facilities. But when you never expect it you may encounter Wolves, who move in small groups. Their job is to secure each area of the island from the Ghosts, and they are tracking them."

The Wolves have advanced training and tactics that mirror those of the Ghosts, so expect them to put up one hell of a fight. The four lieutenants taking directives from Walker – YellowLeg, Rosebud, Silverback, and Firefly – all have special assignments to carry out on Auroa and will be major roadblocks for the Ghosts throughout Breakpoint. Each also has a particular specialty; we don't have actionable intelligence on all of them, but we know Rosebud is the elite sniper of the group.

The Wolves may be the most dangerous human threat, but beware the drones as well. The saying goes "Ghosts never die." The drones are on Auroa to test that theory. Some Ghost Recon fans were off-put by the sci-fi vibe of killer robots, but if you've been paying attention to the cutting edge of the military-industrial complex, that future is already here. Several firms already have working prototypes of autonomous drones armed to the teeth with cutting-edge weaponry. When brainstorming ways to up the difficulty in Breakpoint and present new cooperative challenges to players, Ubisoft researchers visited real drone manufacturers and used their technology as a springboard to explore a weapon that's likely going to be a major component of the next century of warfare.

Drones are the ultimate soldier. They are highly resistant to the environment and can

operate on any terrain. They don't need much downtime, and armed with machine learning, they can adapt to the threats they face. Their modular design means they can be equipped to handle a variety of tasks, and one militarized drone can carry more weapons and ammo than any fleshy super soldier you can name. Perhaps most importantly for power-hungry, morally questionable leaders in the world, a drone won't second-guess its orders.

To create variety, Ubisoft designed more than 20 drones for the world of Breakpoint, each of which has different strengths, weaknesses, and operational objectives.

The flying drones are a problem no matter where you are. These militarized sentries are used to keep the wilderness and base camps under supervision. They often move in swarms like bees, and their unpredictable flight patterns make them a tricky target. The toughest part about fighting the flying drones is they are smart enough to try and preserve line of sight, repositioning when you try to take cover. They also don't give up pursuit easily. Even if you hop in a vehicle and hightail it out of a fire zone, they give chase. Either you kill them or you die.

The ground drones may not have the agility of their aviation-based brethren, but they pack a serious punch. Many of the ground-based drones have multiple mounted guns, which allows them to target multiple players at once. The different versions of ground drones carry different weapons, but all are well armored. You need to shoot off protective plates to reveal the glowing heart of these steel beasts. Each also has a glowing eye. If you deal enough damage there you can momentarily stun the drone, opening up a brief window to line up critical shots with heavy payloads like grenade launchers and rocket launchers.

The most dangerous drones of all are the hulking behemoths, which provide one of the toughest challenges in Breakpoint. At launch, 21 of these monsters will be patrolling secured regions of Auroa, and they require strategy and precision to take down. Ubisoft wants them to feel like mythological beasts that should be feared, and the multiple Gatling guns and burst rocket launchers do a good job of setting that tone. Their rockets can shoot at up to four players at the same time, and when you drain their health enough they start indiscriminately unleashing mortar salvos.

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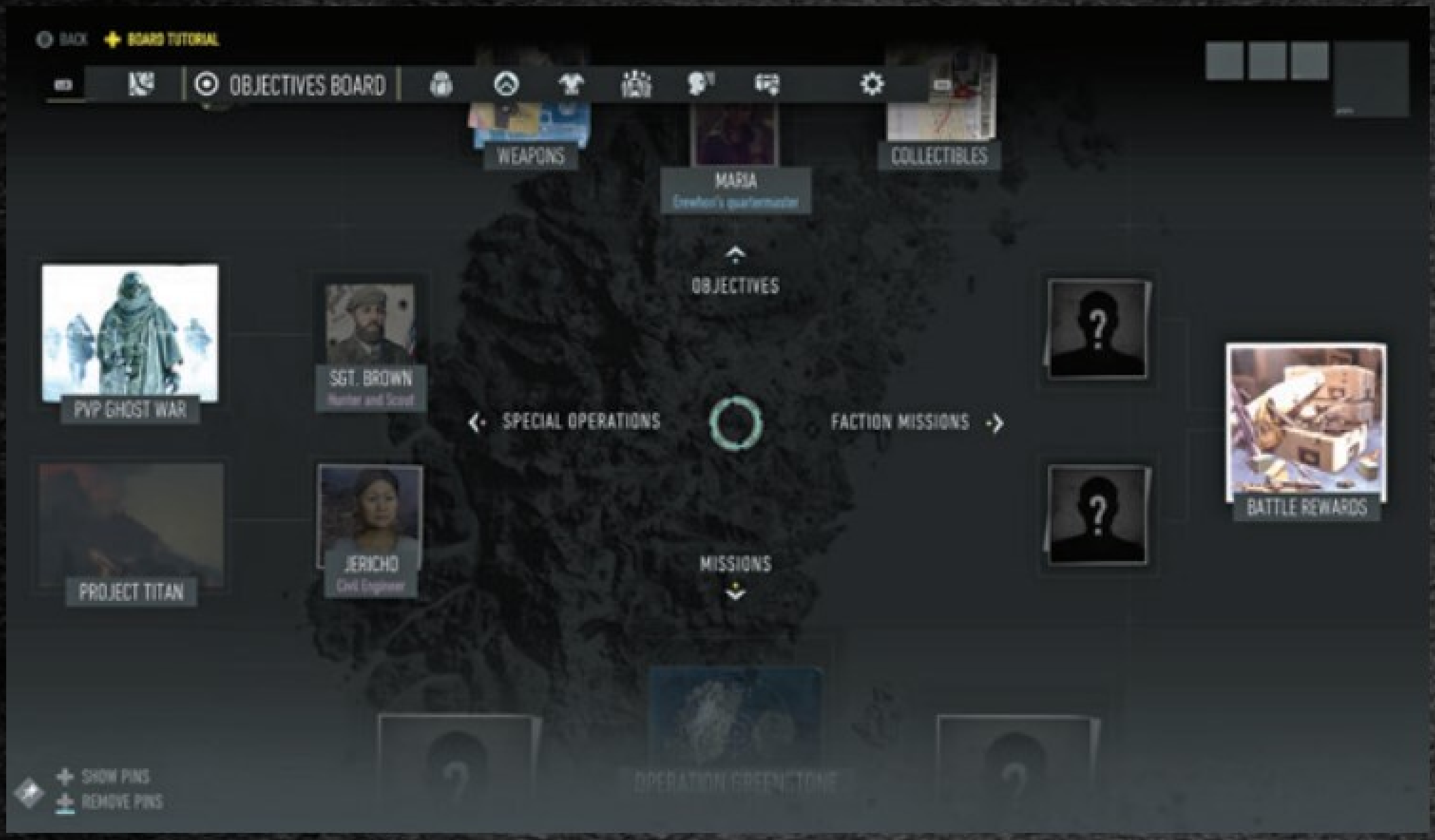


PLAY YOUR WAY

Ghost Recon Breakpoint's open world is packed with regions to explore, enemies to confront, weapons to find, and characters to meet. Given the multitude of objectives the player has on his or her to-do list at any given time, Ubisoft decided to create a new objective board so players can quickly see what missions they have available and prioritize them as they see fit.

The objective board isn't a giant quest log, but rather a visual board inspired by CIA references where you can see the images of your various contacts and targets across the island and track your operations related to each. Visually, it builds off the Santa Blanca overview in Wildlands, but it's much deeper. You can now pan across the board, which shows images of the different non-player characters (NPCs) you are trying to locate. When you click on them you can see all the various missions linked to that NPC. Other sections are dedicated to locating specific loot, faction missions, Ghost War, and the raids that are currently slated to release after launch.

A pin system allows you to prioritize three different objectives at any given time, which are tracked on the HUD. For instance, if you gained some intel about the whereabouts of a new weapon, attachment, or weapon blueprint, you can select it from the objective board and it will now be treated just a like a mission, with a waypoint pointing you in the right direction.

Not every Ghost Recon player wants their HUD taking up the entire screen, so Ubisoft designed a new system frankly we're surprised hasn't been done before – a HUD toggle button. At any time, you can press down on the D-pad to display or remove the UI from the screen.

Breakpoint ships with several different HUD presets for different types of players, including those who prefer a military simulation style experience. The customizable HUD allows you to tweak those presets to your heart's content as well. Want to remove the health meter, ammo count, or red clouds from the minimap that indicate an enemy threat? Go for it. Maybe you want to go fully immersive and remove the minimap, all enemy markers, and even the detection gauges so you don't receive a audio or visual warning if an enemy has spotted you? You can do that too.

The customization also extends to the way players receive information about missions. Breakpoint has a feature like the exploration mode in Assassin's Creedy Odyssey that removes waypoints.

"The thing that we know that our players love in Ghost Recon – I think it's true for lots of triple-A games but maybe even more true for tactical shooters – is the feeling of being self-guided, that you can choose your objective and you can feel like there's not too much hand holding," says UX and realization director Matthew Tomkinson.

All the missions and objectives in Breakpoint can be followed without a specific marker. You can instead use clues the game provides about the missions via either in-game items or interrogations to narrow down your search and find the objectives organically. For example, when the Ghosts are tasked with finding the Homesteader hideout, the player is tipped off about which province it's in and the nearby presence of a lighthouse. From here, the player must explore the region by foot, with binoculars, or using a scouting drone to locate the landmark. Some missions may take more steps. To learn the location of particular Sentinel commander, you may have to interrogate an enemy stationed in a Sentinel camp. The cool part is you could extract this information from nearly any soldier stationed in a Sentinel base; you don't have to find it by going to a specific person in a specific location.

If you prefer a more modern gaming experience with a busy HUD that's always pointing you to the next objective and highlighting enemies along the way, you have that option as well.

GHOST WAR 2.0

Everything you need to know about Ghost Recon Breakpoint's PvP mode

Ghost Recon Wildlands was the first game in the series to ship without a competitive multiplayer mode, a strange move considering it has always been a central part of the brand since the early days of Xbox Live. Ubisoft eventually added the Ghost War PvP suite to the game as a free update seven months later and continued to iterate on it up to and including this year. The 4v4 mode delivers tense, cat-and-mouse matches as teams move cautiously to preserve their cover while trying to triangulate the threat. With a short time-to-kill, getting a jump on opponents often makes the difference between living and dying.

Ghost Recon Breakpoint ships with Ghost War on day one, and given the warm reception the mode had in Wildlands, Ubisoft wants to preserve the white-knuckled action. However, the team at Ubisoft that developed the mode for Wildlands also saw a lot of room for improvement as it transitioned to work on the next game.

The competitive multiplayer experience may happen independent from the campaign, but Breakpoint doesn't divorce player progression into two tracks. Instead, your character carries over the same cosmetics, weapons, attachments, and other unlocks from one mode to another. "Everything you do, whatever you choose to play, all the time you invest in the game will feed your character," says creative director Eric Couzian. "You'll never waste minutes in the game."

This extends to the classes and perks you unlock. Breakpoint has four classes (assault, sharpshooter, panther, and field medic) and around 30 perks. You can equip three perks at one time, and the vast majority of them are viable options regardless of which mode you're playing. Some just have a base value. For instance, Slim Shadow increases your stealth 60 percent. Others have trade-offs like the Twig perk, which increases your health regen speed 100 percent but drops your maximum health by 50 points. Only a few perks are designed specifically for the campaign; other than those you can mix and match between the roughly 30 perks however you see fit.

Since progression is shared, Ubisoft wanted to make sure you can gain XP at a similar rate no matter which mode you are playing. "There's pretty much a parity," says lead Ghost War game designer Alexandru Rais. "The philosophy behind PvP and XP gains and especially rewards is that we compare PvP with the higher skill activities that you get in PVE."

All weapons and attachments are shared between modes, but since Breakpoint employs a level-based loot system, not all guns are created equal. To prevent high-leveled players from running roughshod over ill-equipped newbs in Ghost War, Ubisoft says there is a loot-level cap in place to normalize damage. You can still bring legendary weapons to the party (Ghost Recon's version of exotics), but their stat increases are marginalized when you turn your sights on fellow players.

Progression may be shared across the campaign and multiplayer, but Ubisoft says Ghost War rewards players with unique customization options you can't find in the wider region of Auroa.

SHAPING THE BATTLEFIELD

Since Wildlands shipped without competitive multiplayer, the Ghost War developers had the tricky task of taking locations from the Bolivian map and retrofitting them for competitive play. Working from the ground up on Breakpoint, they have the leeway to handcraft these maps to tailor them specifically for PvP. Their objective? Make each map viable for all tactics and play styles, whether you are a close-quarters rusher or a patient sniper.

Breakpoint ships with six maps to start, two of which we experienced in a hands-on session. Since the community clamored so much for a snow map when Ubisoft first introduced Ghost to Wildlands, the studio wanted to make sure it shipped one off the bat for Breakpoint. The other map we played, Skell Port, is essentially an improved version of the popular Quarry map set in an industrial offloading port.

Six maps seem paltry compared to other shooters with multiplayer components, but to give the play experience more variety Ubisoft can change the time of day and weather on each. Players can also set up custom matches with variable settings. For instance, if you want a pure combat experience you can

remove the presence of drones.

Ghost War ships with two modes at launch – elimination and sabotage. None of the maps feature NPCs or vehicles.

Regardless of which map or mode you're playing, we're happy to report that Ghost Recon has finally moved into the 21st century of competitive multiplayer by adding dedicated servers. Players no longer have to put up with the frustrations of peer-to-peer networking, which means you can expect a better quality experience and better cheating detection. For those of you worried about the matchmaking pairing you up against elite players, Ubisoft says the matchmaking is based on a skill rating.

We also learned a few other infrastructure details worth sharing during our time at Ubisoft. Ghost War will not have a ranked mode at launch, crossplay, or a play-test server for giving balancing tweaks a test run before going live. "We won't have a play-test server, but we do have a lot of tracking and data analysis in place," Rais says. "We have a team that's dedicated to analyzing the stats that come out of the game, so we'll have that, plus we plan on course correcting throughout the game if we need to do balance changes and such."

COMBAT READINESS

One of the edicts driving the design decisions with the new version of Ghost War is to encourage active gameplay and not reward the passive play, which is immediately noticeable when you fire up the game. One of the main ways Ubisoft accomplishes this is the new randomized, scattered loot. Players no longer start with supplies like grenades, health syringes, or drones. Before the match begins, players can examine a map overview to see where the loot caches are located, pinging them to provide direction for teammates. Once the match starts, players scramble to grab a few supplies before the bullets start firing. All of the gear operates as consumables, so once you've used your drone it's gone.

After the rush to stockpile resources, the focus turns to moving into position and identifying the opposition. Drones aren't nearly as powerful in the new version of Ghost War as they were previously. The detection mechanics are now more demanding, so you must be within 200 meters to get a drone to mark an enemy. The blast radius for taking down drones is super forgiving as well; all you need to do is aim in its general direction to end the surveillance. I'll have to play more to determine if the drones feel too nerfed, but my first impression is I like their limited effectiveness. If you are tagged, it also seems easier to lose your mark.

The blending between campaign and multiplayer makes its presence known in the gameplay, particularly with the light survival mechanics introduced in Breakpoint. Falling or jumping off higher levels can result in injury and even death, and when you're injured you may need to take a breather to apply a bandage to regain mobility.

As in Wildlands, the best-of-three showdowns are fraught with tension and anticipation. To encourage more firefights, the elimination mode now features a shrinking combat zone like a battle-royale game. This ensures more matches end in fireworks instead of stalemates where teams are comfortable entrenched in distant cover. Ubisoft says you cannot turn off the shrinking combat zone for a more "MilSim" experience, but if the community requests it the devs will look into making it an option for custom matches.

continued from page 53

SURVIVAL AT ANY COST

Surviving the onslaught from the overwhelming number of human and mechanical hostiles on Auroa won't be easy, especially if you prefer the Leeroy Jenkins approach to combat. Ubisoft made conscious decisions to raise the stakes with light survival elements that make taking a cautious approach all the more important.

You can no longer jump from extreme heights or barrel down steep mountainsides at breakneck paces without facing the consequence of injury. Losing your footing sends you sliding down the incline and could potentially leave you with a broken limb, a major complication you don't need if you're fleeing from an enemy attack. Regenerating health won't aid your cause, either.

Several degrees of injury can occur when you take damage. If you're lightly wounded, you start limping and lose stamina. Take too many bullets or too much damage from a fall, and you begin limping heavily, start bleeding, and have a harder time aiming. If you really blow it, you will no longer be able to run, stumbling and limping with only your pistol in hand to face nearby threats. Finding cover and applying a bandage on the fly will help you recover some of your health bars, but you'll also need to use a syringe to replenish that health.

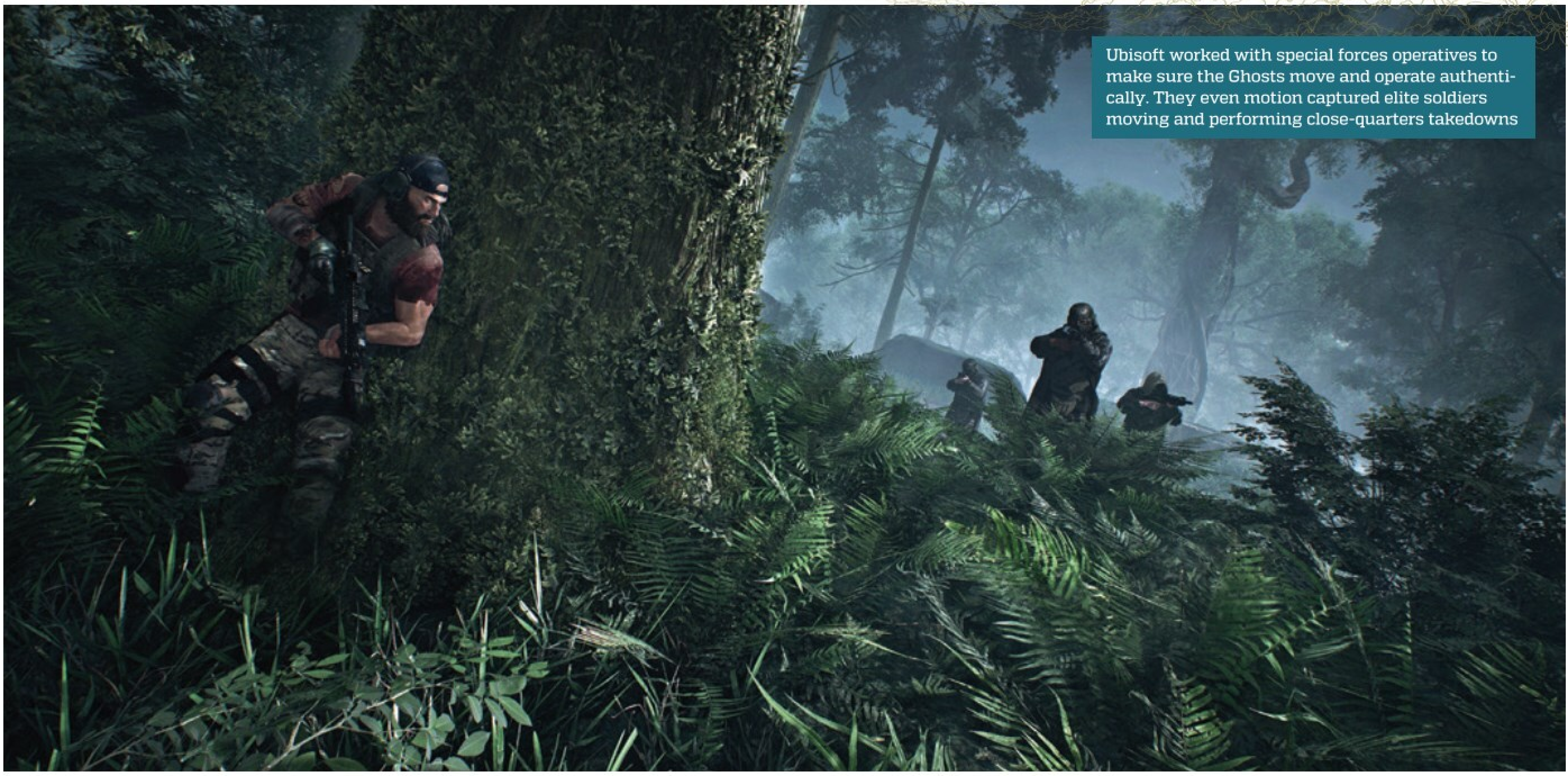
With no supply drops to replenish their stocks, the Ghosts on Auroa need to find their own resources. Thankfully, they appear to be abundant. Running low on ammo? Take out the roving enemy patrols and grab their leftover magazines. Need more health items? Collect the various plants littered around the island and craft them yourself or scavenge a base.

"For us, really, the objective is to fulfill the fantasy of being spec ops, and we wanted to go further than just the fighting and the fact that you kill enemies," says UX and realization director Matthew Tomkinson. "We wanted the Ghosts to be able to rest, spend time traveling, and also take advantage of the environment. Auroa for us is almost the main character of the game. The island is super important."

During our extended hands-on with Breakpoint, we found several resources like flowers, aloe vera, and termite nests sprinkled across the terrain, giving Ghosts ample opportunity to gather supplies. Some fauna are roaming the regions as well. A well-placed shot to a deer's heart yielded a good stock of protein my soldier could prep back at camp.

The bivouac is the only area where players can engage in the crafting system. You also have other options when making camp. Preparations allow you to choose among a series of minor buffs that grant temporary accuracy increases, slightly larger health reservoirs, increased stamina, a larger drone range, or even increased resistance to injuries or fatigue. You can also swap out your character class or change your loadout, heal yourself, eat food to replenish your health and stamina, and set the time of day for your next mission.

Running around the island during an extended play session, we didn't feel the need to set up a bivouac frequently. You gather enough resources by taking out enemy camps and scavenging locations to keep you decently supplied, but it's wise to gain those temporary buffs before tackling big missions like infiltrating Skell facilities.



Ubisoft worked with special forces operatives to make sure the Ghosts move and operate authentically. They even motion captured elite soldiers moving and performing close-quarters takedowns

BEYOND THE BREAKPOINT

As with every recent Ubisoft game, the publisher has big-post launch plans for Ghost Recon Breakpoint. In addition to the standard quality-of-life patches that fine-tune the game and fix annoyances, every few months Ubisoft plans to launch featuring new faction missions with additional weapons and cosmetics to earn. After the popularity of the Sam Fisher and Predator missions in Wildlands, the publisher also has ideas for more crossover cameos, teasing the glowing red eyes of the Terminator during this past E3. The Ghost War competitive multiplayer suite will receive regular updates as well that include balance changes and new maps, modes, events, and classes. You also have the first Ghost Recon raids to look forward to. We're interested to see how exactly these manifest given the franchise's much shorter time-to-kill and emphasis on tactical variety.

Ubisoft says community feedback will help drive the evolution of the experience, so if you have ideas related to the campaign or multiplayer or would like to see the permadeth Ghost mode or PvEvP Mercenaries mode from Wildlands return, make your voice heard.

But first, we have to see how all the new elements of Breakpoint coalesce. We're bullish on the game, but curious to learn whether the fiction is well-written enough to feel plausible and grounded, if the military simulation flourishes appease the old-school Ghost Recon fans who want a more tactical experience, and how the single-player experienced is impacted by the lack of having A.I. squad mates (who are parachuting in as reinforcements via an update after launch). With its October launch only weeks away, we won't have to wait long to discover the truth. ◈

You can learn more about Ghose Recon Breakpoint by heading to gameinformer.com

PURSUIT
911

Need For Speed Heat

Giving glorious chase

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Driving
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
Ghost Games

» Release
November 8

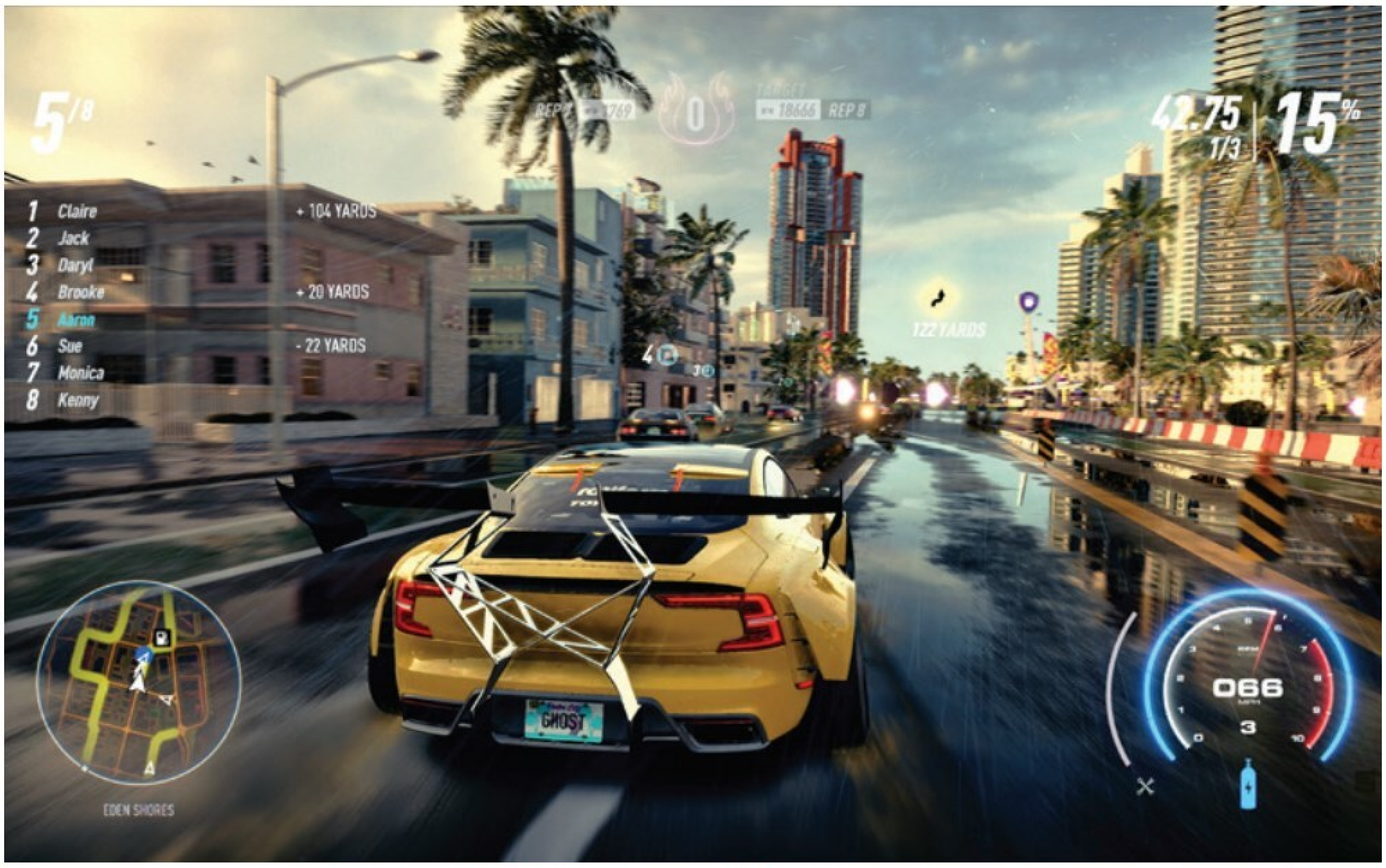
There's little doubt among fans that Need For Speed is in need of reinvigoration. The past few entries of the series have been bogged down by intrusive microtransactions, poor storytelling, and lackluster settings. However, a beautiful new Miami-inspired metropolis called Palm City as well as a particularly chaotic implementation of NFS's classic boogeyman, the street-racer hating police force, might do just enough to propel the series back to the top.

During Gamescom 2019, we got to spend 30 minutes fiddling with customization options and playing out two street races. There is a large array of customization options for those who want to deck out their rides. We were given a sleek-looking Mercedes AMG to play around with in a garage before the first race, and I spent a few minutes switching out various models of canards, wheels, splitters, and skirts just to see how it would change the car's look. Stance tuning, paint and decal options, and even modifying the sound of your exhaust are also options you can tweak. Alongside your car, you can customize your driver's hair, clothes, and shoes. There weren't that many options in the demo, but they did run the gamut from mundane, like curly hair, to wacky, with you being able to don serial killer masks.

The difference between the two races in the demo are night and day – literally. The first race has you gunning around Palm City's harbor, passing ships and dockworkers in a giant circle. Heat leans more in the direction of arcadey than realistic, with turbo-boosted collisions and spectacular particle effects creating the sorts of crashes that wouldn't be out of place in *The Fast and the Furious*. Hitting the nitro, which slowly refills over the race, sends you barreling ahead at breakneck speed for a brief instance of time, letting you hit trees hard enough you rip them from their roots and smashing small walls to pieces. The nitro is also practical, with careful uses of it letting you overtake other racers at a critical juncture. Admittedly, outside of the spectacle and how satisfying it is to pull off a tight turn and eclipse your opponents, the day race is traditional, without any notable modifiers or hooks to make it stand out. The next race, which takes place at night, is anything but and does a great job of demonstrating the tension and surprising amount of emergent storytelling that Heat is aiming for.

The race, which took me and the A.I.-controlled racers through the middle of Palm City, crossing through busy intersections and tearing across bridges, started normal enough. We zipped down the road, ramming into one another as we vied for an early lead. However, once I hit the nitro, cop cars started showing up out of nowhere. Unlike the cops in Payback and the reboot, these officers were much more relentless – usefully so. Bumping into cops calls in more cops. When I realized that, I started ramming every one I saw, creating an influx of police cruisers that were smashing into my opponents' cars and sending them flying off the road. My agent of chaos strategy eventually backfired, as one plowed right into me and forced me to lose the race. However, in the moment, the thrill was so exciting that the loss wasn't even close to being a bitter pill.

That's not where the fun ends either. After a night race concludes, the police will chase you, forcing you to evade them and seek out a safe house. This might sound like a chore on paper, but I found the experience to be immensely entertaining as I darted through alleyways and crashed through barriers in a desperate attempt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1 Claire
2 Jack
3 Daryl
4 Brooke
5 Aaron
6 Sue
7 Monica
8 Kenny
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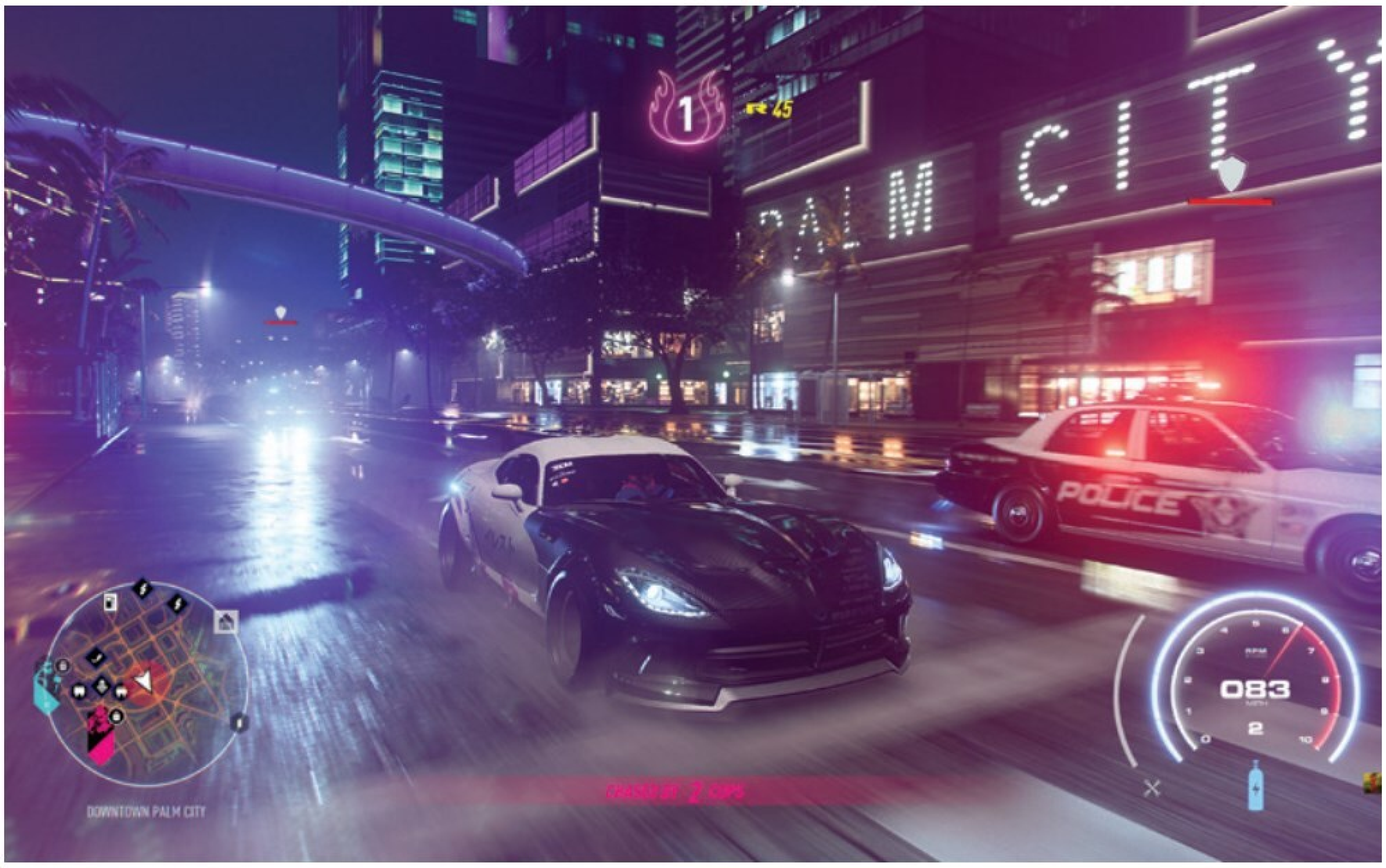
EDEN SHORES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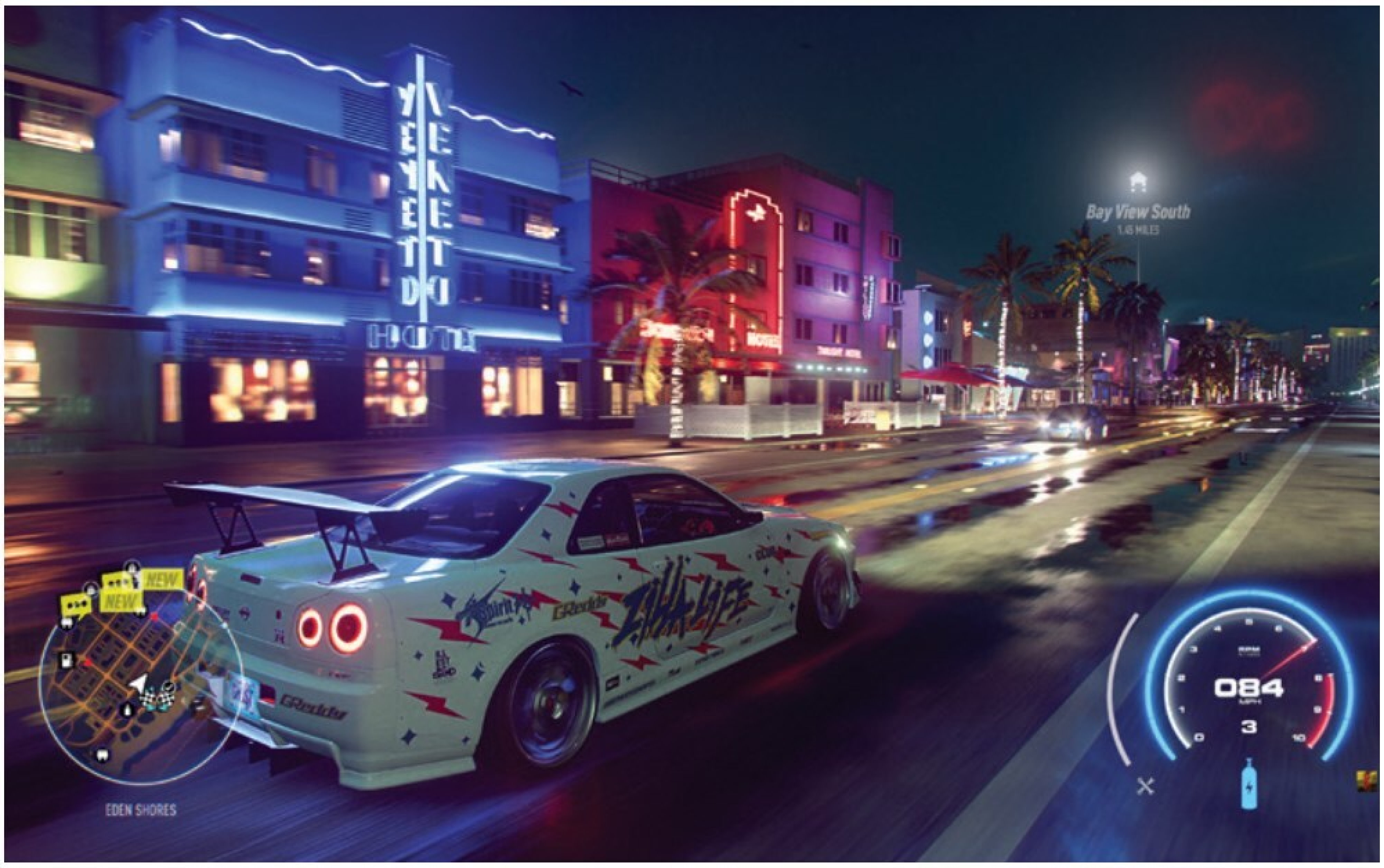
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EDEN SHORES

to evade cruisers and SWAT vans as they tried to bounce me around like a ball. Hearing the officers have detailed, convincing conversations over the police scanner about what me and the other racers were doing also added to the tension and made the chase feel particularly cinematic.

In the end, the justice brigade got me with a spike strip and produced a fantastic pile-up spectacle that rivals any of the police chases I've had in Grand Theft Auto V thanks to the overwhelming aggression and limited means to fight back. There are no other means of defense except your skills behind the wheel. Be crafty or get caught, losing whatever prize money (used to buy upgrades for your car) you gained during the race while also gaining some reputation currency. It's not clear yet how reputation affects the game.

A number of questions remain about how Heat will handle progression and storytelling. However, the strength and intensity of the demo we played as well as EA's confirmation that Heat is ditching lootboxes entirely after Payback's grindy inclusion of them has our hopes up that this entry might be the one that puts the series back on track.
» **Javy Gwaltney**

Avengers

Assemble your heroes how you want

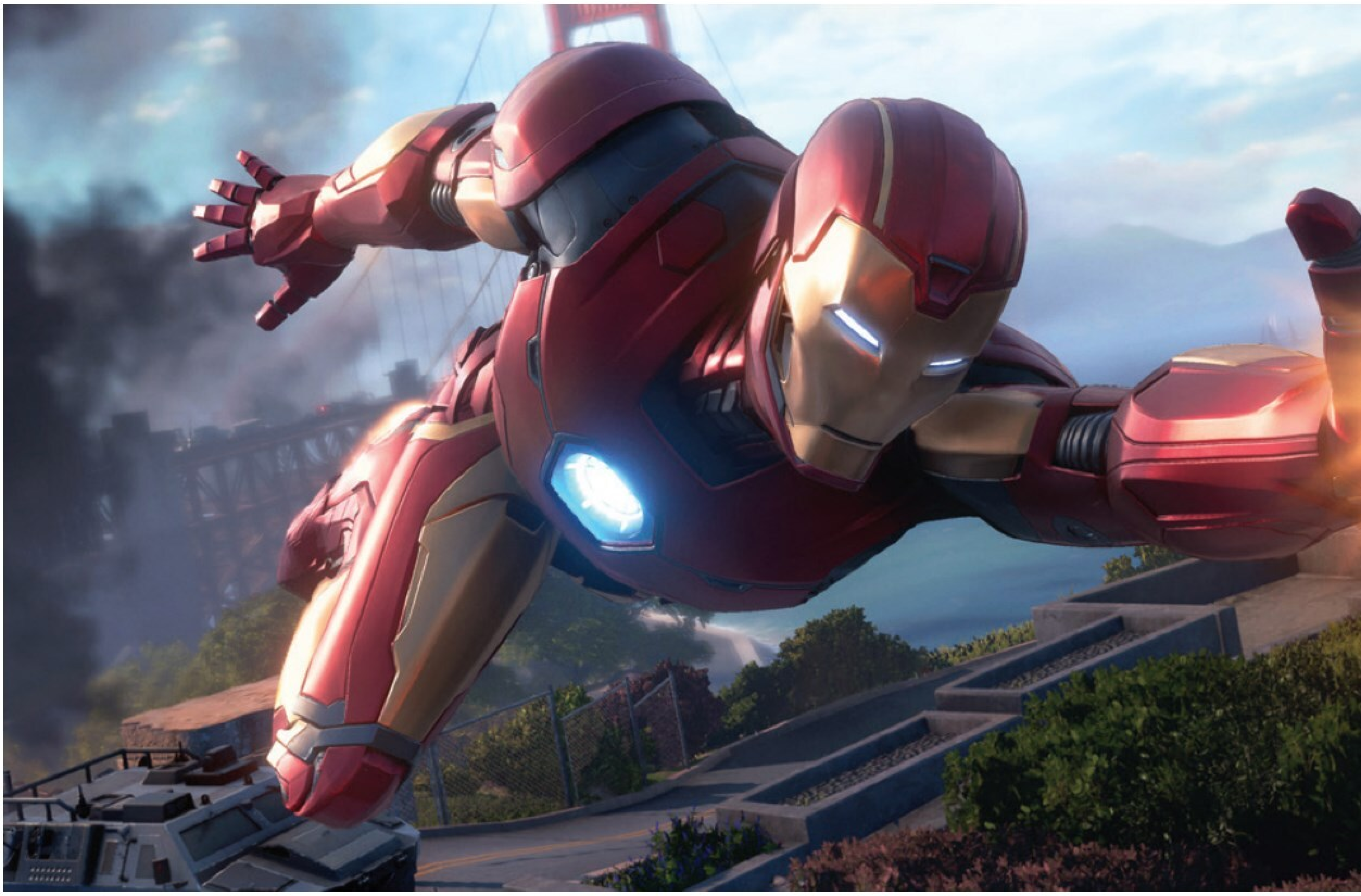
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Crystal Dynamics,
Eidos Montreal

» Release
May 15



Since the E3 reveal of Avengers, Crystal Dynamics has pushed the notion that players will be able to realize the powers of Earth's Mightiest Heroes in unique, personalized ways. While a hands-off demo at E3 gave us a vague idea of how the pieces fit together, we were left with more questions than answers.

As we already know, Avengers is an original story focused on the superhero team's fall from grace. The A-Day celebration meant to laud the Avengers backfires as a surprise attack on the Golden Gate Bridge serves as a distraction for the heroes. The real threat involved blowing up the Avengers' Helicarrier and leveling much of San Francisco. As the city struggles to pick up the pieces, anger and blame falls on the shoulders of the iconic Marvel heroes.

The 20-minute hands-on portion of my demo is the same sequence shown at E3, which serves as the opening tutorial. In the mission, I play through sections as all five of the playable Avengers: Thor, Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America, and Black Widow. Thor swings his mighty hammer Mjolnir around, sending enemies flying, and he can throw (and recall) the legendary hammer on command. Meanwhile, Iron Man is better served hovering over the battlefield, raining death from above. While I felt a bit underwhelmed by the simple nature of Thor and Iron Man's combat, I loved rampaging through a sequence as Hulk, or brawling and deflecting with Captain America's signature shield. My demo culminated with a battle between Black Widow and Taskmaster, a villain known for his ability to learn enemy fighting styles. Because of this, I must constantly adapt using Black Widow's mix of close-range martial arts, mid-range gunplay, and acrobatic evasive maneuvers.

The fallout of the A-Day disaster affects each of the heroes differently. Captain America is lost in the explosion. Tony Stark withdraws from the world, with no fortune or tech to fall back on. He feels as though he no longer has the answers for what the team needs. Bruce Banner begins questioning the role of superheroes and blames himself to the point where gets stuck in Hulk form. Black Widow returns to her life as a spy, as she feels guilty for not being there for Captain America. Thor believes he's no longer worthy to wield Mjolnir, so he leaves it and decides to humbly serve the people of Midgard.

In addition, superheroes are now outlawed, and in their place is Advanced Idea Mechanics (AIM). Five years after the destruction of A-Day, superheroes are gone from the public eye, with AIM's advanced synthdroid A.I. filling their shoes. While AIM puts on a public-friendly face, its pursuit of a society governed by technology could result in one of the biggest threats the planet has ever seen. Despite their reservations about being superheroes, the Avengers can't sit idly by and let AIM reshape the world in its image.

With the heroes in disparate places physically and emotionally, the story of Avengers is about reassembling the world's preeminent superhero team. While I only actually played that initial tutorial sequence, Crystal Dynamics tells me the rest of the missions are more expansive, feature more difficult enemies and have fewer quick-time events. When you're ready to jump into action, you use the War Table to choose from two types of missions: Hero and Warzone. Hero missions are single-player, narrative-driven stages that put you in the shoes of a specific Avenger. On the other hand, Warzone missions can be played single-player or co-op online with up to four players total. Because these are typically more open, you can choose any hero. Playing either mission type unlocks new content, and grants you gear drops to equip on your character.

Gear is specific to each character, so don't expect to equip that new rare reactor coil to Black Widow. Gear items can boost stats like melee, defense, and Heroic, and if you match certain sets of gear, you can reap synergy bonuses.

You can also customize your heroes' various skills and loadouts through large ability trees unique to each hero. You can customize your loadout however you want, and even swap between different versions of these powers on the fly using the d-pad.

Using these customizations, you can create different archetypes for how you want to play. For example, one player's Thor might be a close-range brawler with the health of a tank, while another player's Thor could be a bit nimbler and rely more on lightning attacks. I'm excited to experiment with Thor and Iron Man to see if I can spec them to play a bit more to my liking than they were configured for my demo.

Avengers also allows players to dictate how their characters look. If you don't like Tony Stark's suit, you can expect a host of other suits to choose from without any gameplay consequence; these skins are 100-percent cosmetic. Some of these cosmetic skins can be earned in game, while others must be purchased from the store. The studio isn't ready to talk about any other potential ways the title could be monetized, but the studio currently aims to keep everything in the store purely cosmetic.

If these five heroes aren't up your alley, Crystal Dynamics has you covered. In addition to the SDCC reveal that Ms. Marvel herself, Kamala Khan, is in the game (including the opening scene), new heroes and mission regions will be made available post-launch free of charge. The name "Avengers" will always carry weight with fans, but following a tepid initial response from even the most avid Marvel fans, it remains to be seen if these features and missions laid out by the developers are enough to keep players coming back for the planned years of post-launch support.

» **Brian Shea**

Hades

Building a road out of hell

» Platform
PC • Consoles (TBA)

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Supergiant Games

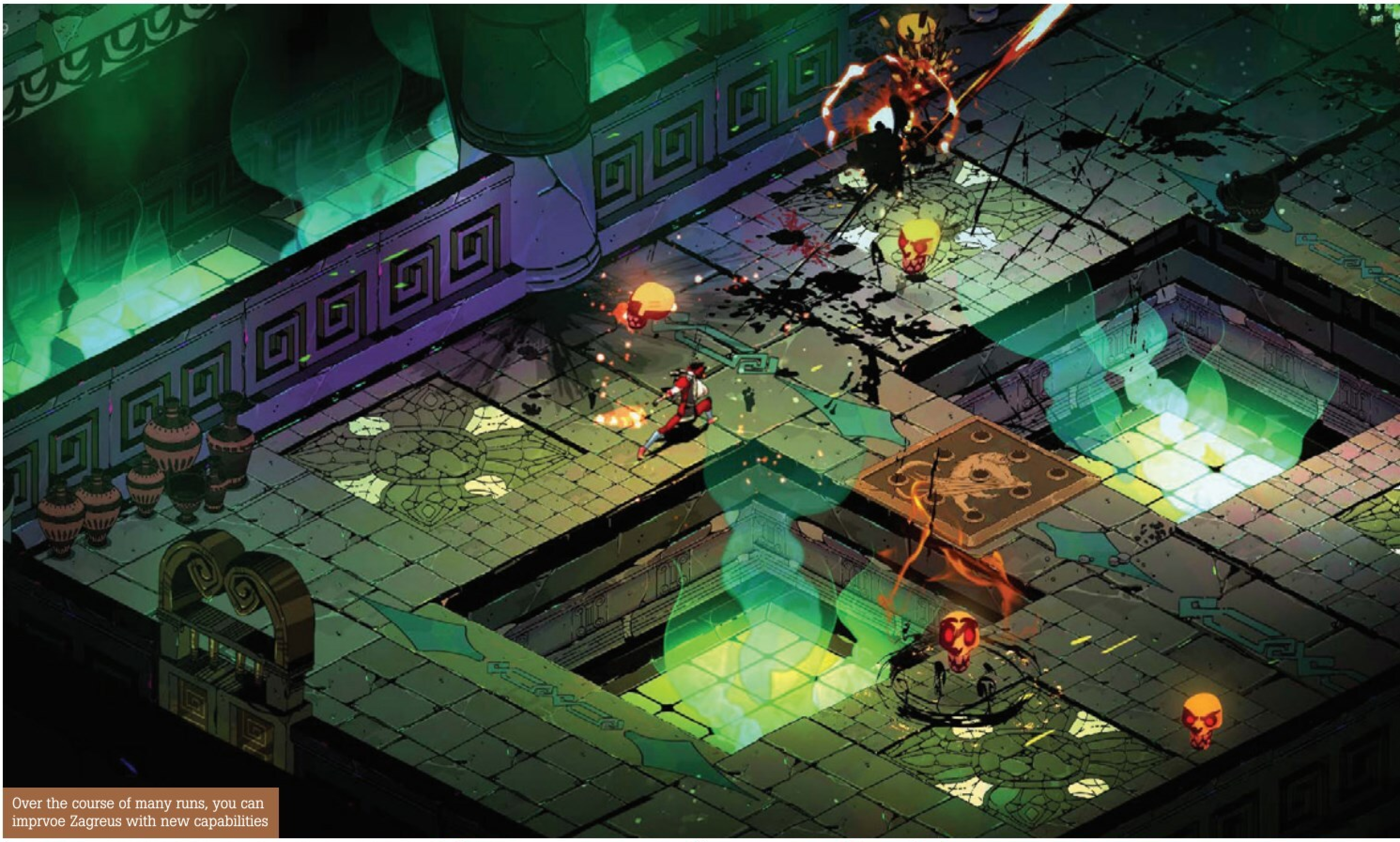
» Developer
Supergiant Games

» Release
2020

Supergiant Games' previous releases – Pyre, Transistor, and Bastion – arrived in players' hands fully formed. But the celebrated developer is taking a different approach with Hades, rolling out a robust initial offering in early access, and adding new chapters in a narratively episodic way over the months, even as systems, enemies, weapons, and levels are carefully layered in. Players adopt the role of an errant prince named Zagreus, desperate to escape the hell of his father's house – who just happens to be Hades, god of the underworld. The roguelite expeditions that ensue are a mix of fast-paced isometric combat and RPG character development and narrative.

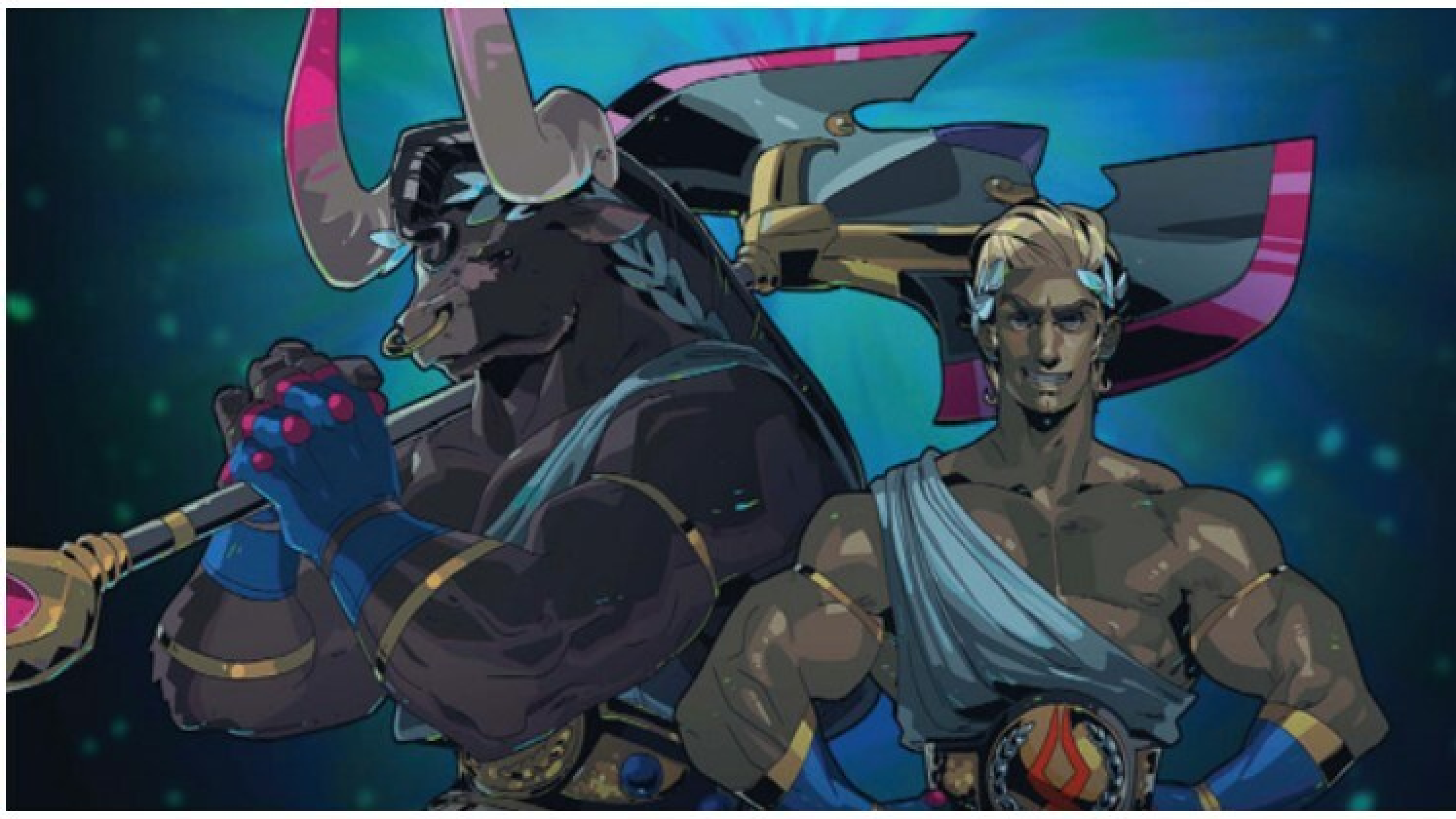
Since the game's announcement and surprise early access release, the team has rolled out a wealth of new content, further fleshing out what was already a sizeable offering. Two new biomes/levels have doubled the actual physical size of the playable game world. Additional Olympians offer new boons in each of your runs to aid your escape attempts. Five new bosses and a ton of fresh enemy types are in place.

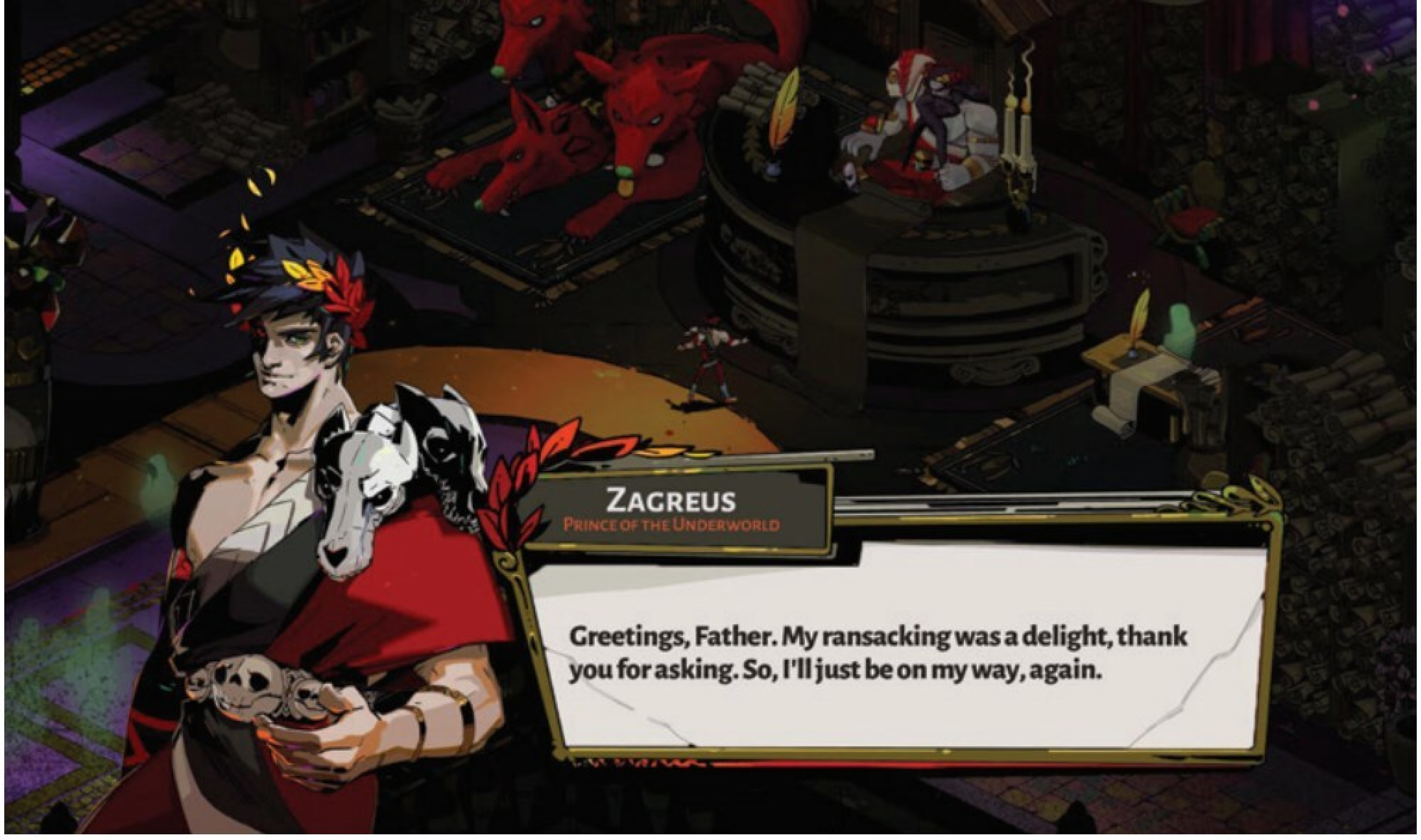
And at the beating heart of the experience, the team keeps layering in hundreds of new story events, which at this point give the game a narrative through-line that feels especially unusual and welcome in the roguelike milieu, fueled by a sense of active feedback to in-game events. "Filling our games with uniquely reactive narrative moments has been key to making their worlds feel alive," says creative director Greg Kasavin. "Some boss characters will remember if you manage to beat them several times in a row, or vice versa. The Olympian characters you meet may comment



Over the course of many runs, you can imprvoe Zagreus with new capabilities

Each new weapon changes the style of gameplay, much like an RPG class





Greetings, Father. My ransacking was a delight, thank you for asking. So, I'll just be on my way, again.

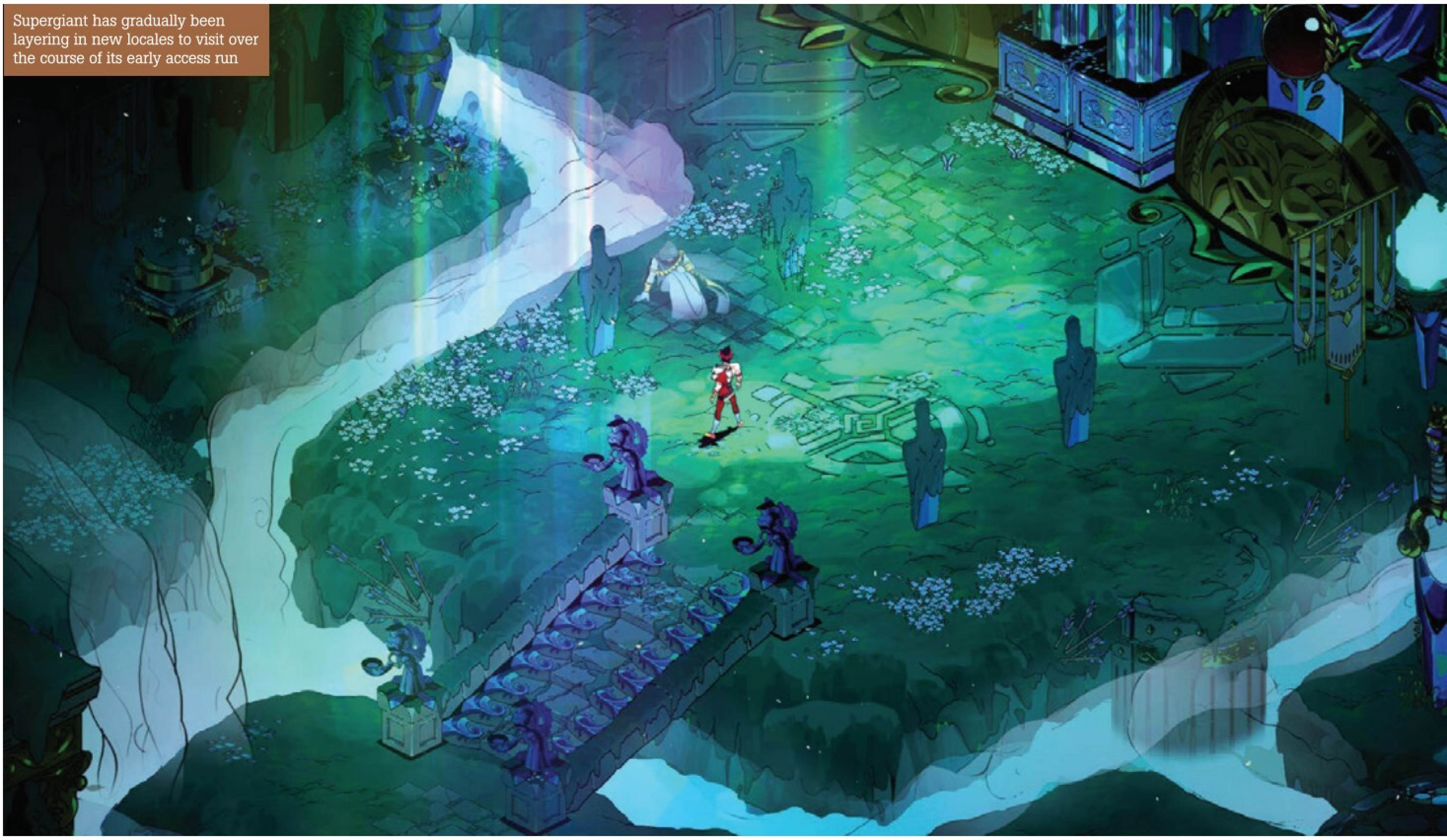
on other gods whose blessings you already have, how far you got in your last escape attempt, or that you're about to die. Hermes, one of our newest Olympians, is kind of the god of speed-running and will even comment if you're playing with the optional gameplay timer on."

Supergiant has layered player feedback directly into its development pipeline. "We regularly read every single feedback message we get, and much of it gets converted straight into tasks for our team," Kasavin says. He particularly cites player support for nailing the game's balance, and a deepening recognition of just how much players are replaying the experience. "We didn't really expect that players would stick with it for hundreds of runs – and potentially hundreds of hours – even despite our goal of designing for replayability. Knowing that the experience and the narrative can remain engaging for this long, we can make sure that the entire game structure supports this type of long-term investment."

Supergiant has become known for the memorable endings of its games, and the team is aiming for Hades to maintain the reputation. With the most recent update, the game offers a conclusion of sorts, but the final true ending of the story is being held back until the final release. "We've always put a lot into the endings of our games, as it's important to us that players feel like their time with our games was well worth it," Kasavin says. In addition, the resource system is being balanced to scale well into the late game, the gifting system is seeing new additions to deepen in-game relationships, and challenges are being built into the endgame. Kasavin also says that a new character is being added to the story, and a new weapon, a big deal that amounts to a new RPG class.

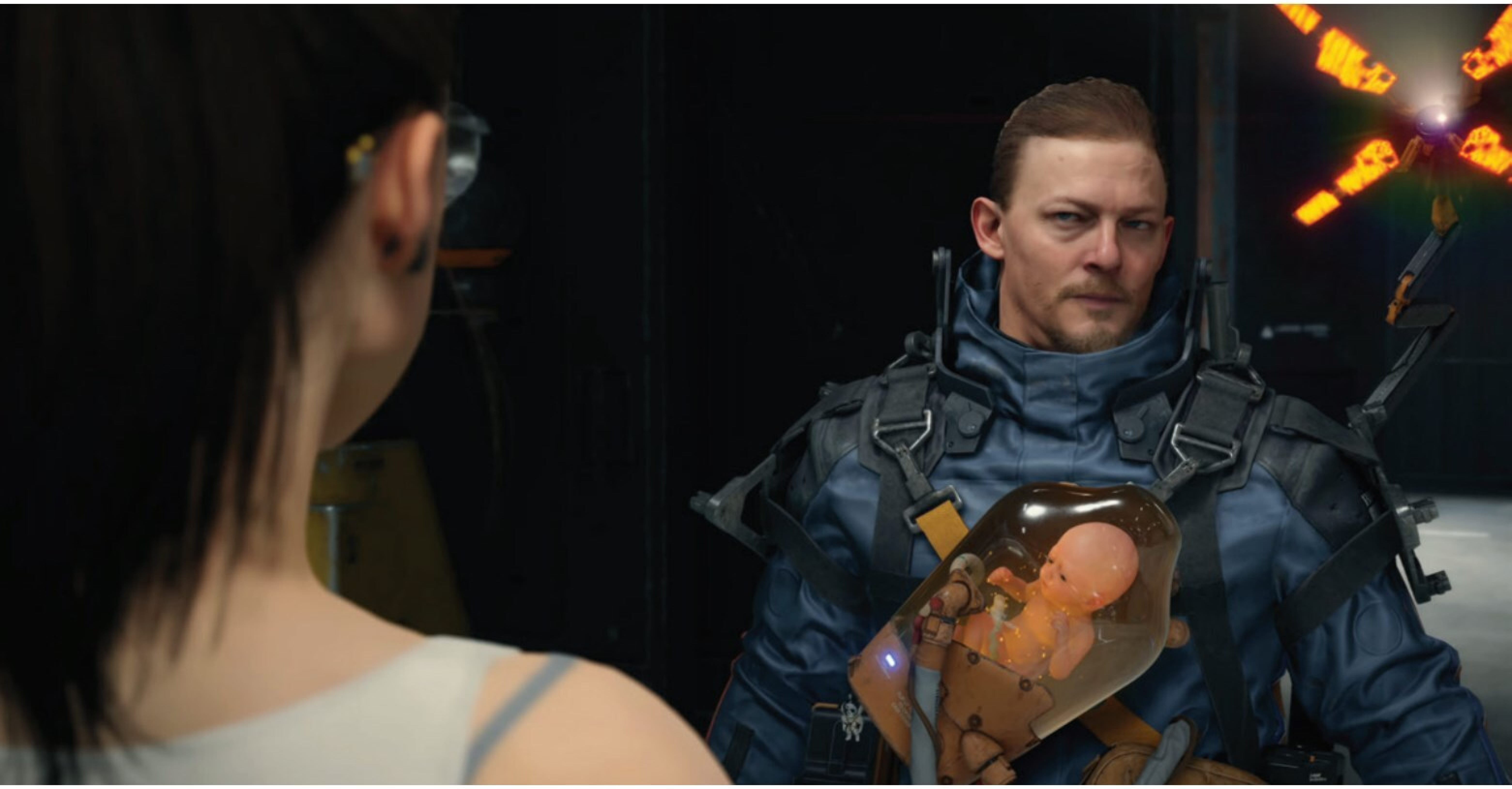
After many months on the Epic Game Store, Supergiant has announced the early access game will also come to Steam near the end of this year, ahead of its 2020 release on PC and unannounced consoles. For my part, I was happy to dip back into the game after the latest update, and my several attempts to scale the ladder of Hades with Zagreus remain great fun. The constant flow of new reactive narrative voice lines lends life to the quiet moments between runs, and the new enemies and locations have the same sheen of quality I've come to expect from the title. Whether you join in on the gradual unfolding of early access, or wait for the full experience to come online, Hades is a family drama worth following. » **Matt Miller**

Supergiant has gradually been layering in new locales to visit over the course of its early access run



Death Stranding

Breaking through to the other side



» Platform
PS4

» Style
1- Player Action

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Kojima Productions

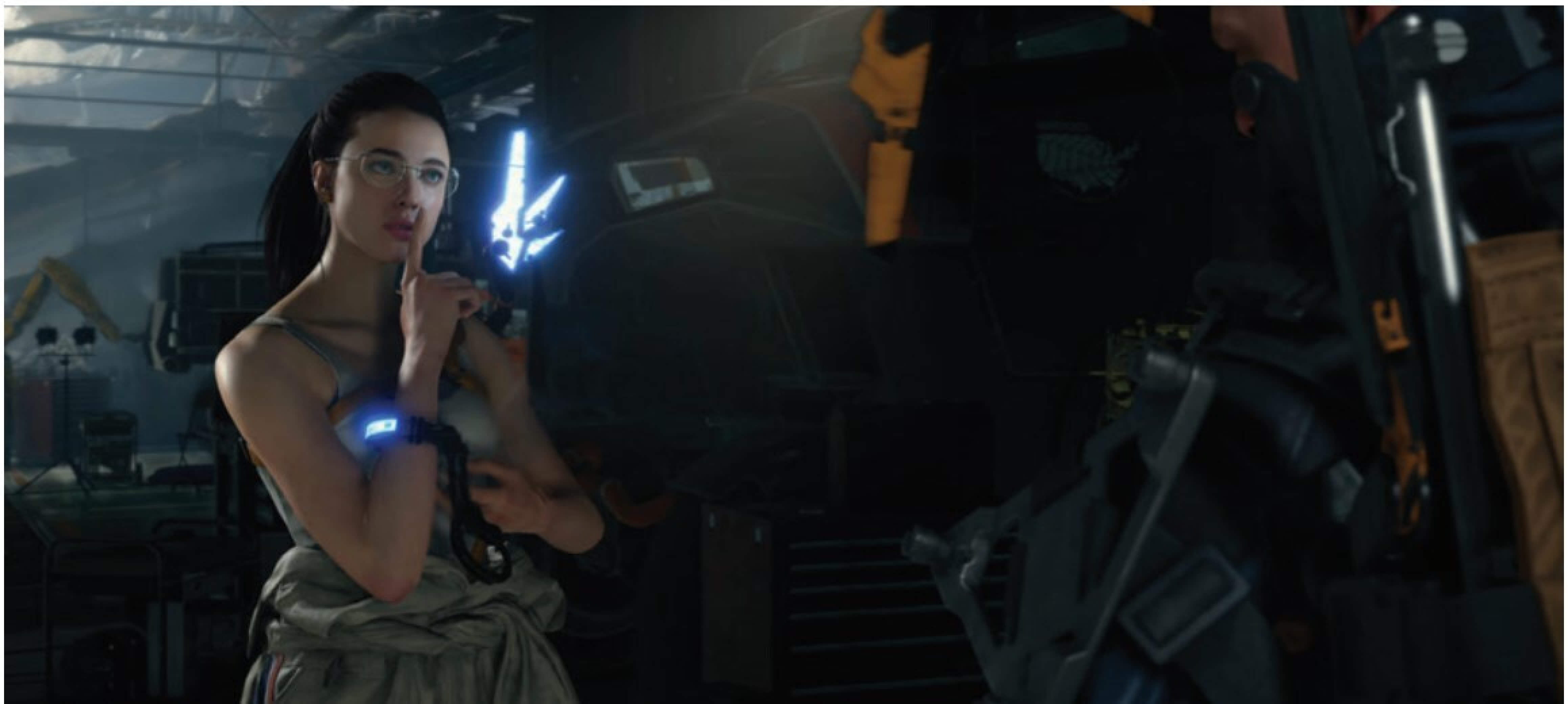
» Release
November 8

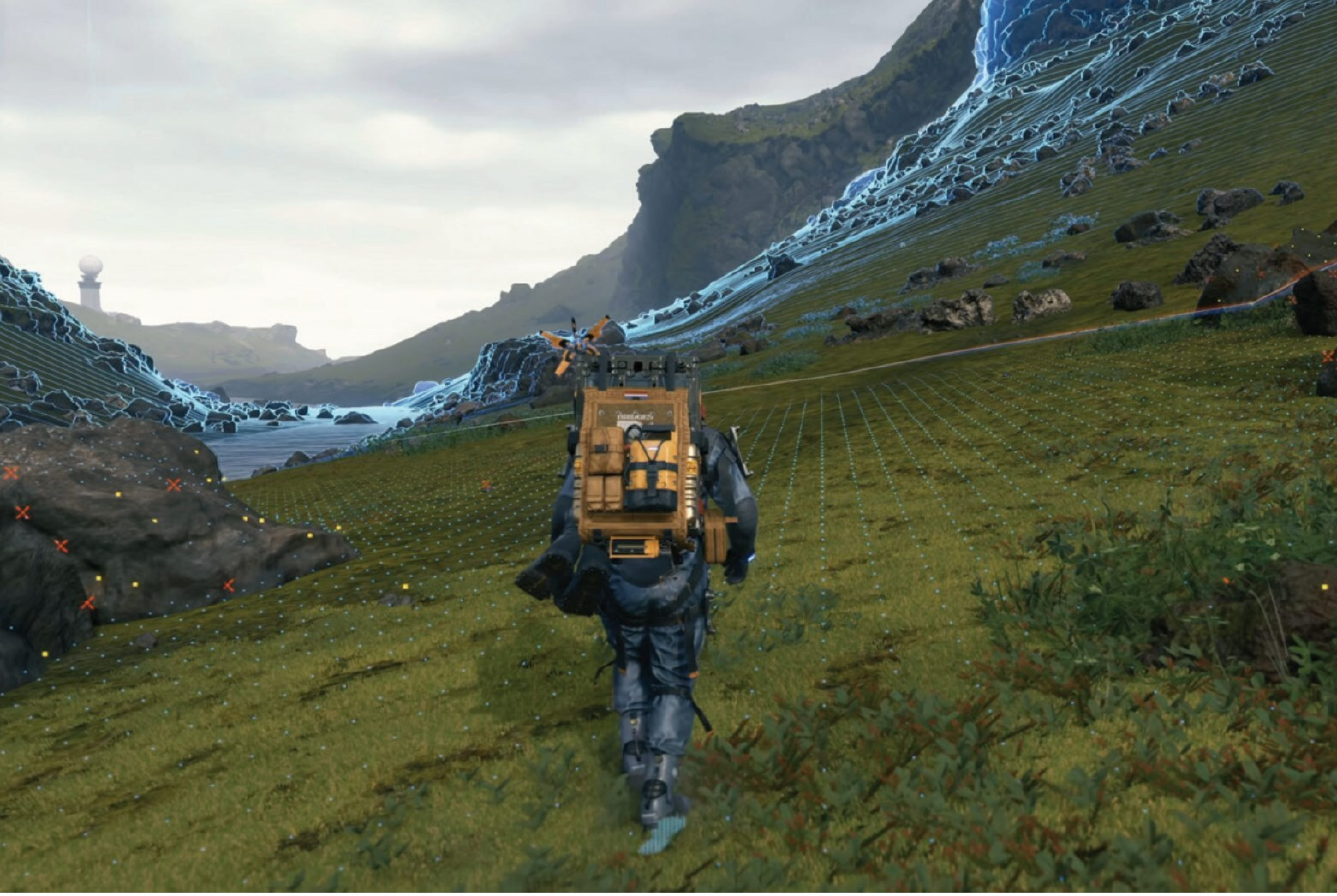
Hideo Kojima has frequently said that Death Stranding is a game about making connections and bridging the divides of modern society, but for a long time we didn't know exactly what that meant. However, a brief stage demo during Gamescom offered some insight into how Kojima's bizarre new world fits together.

In the world of Death Stranding, infants have the capacity to connect to other realms of existence. This invisible reality is full of dangerous creatures, which are sometimes able to touch our reality, causing a great deal of devastation. Protagonist Sam Porter Bridges is a deliveryman who must sneak past these invisible creatures as he reconnects isolated individuals across the country.

Fortunately, Sam has an invaluable tool that helps guide him past these invisible monsters: a baby. When a baby is born to a still mother (a mother who is brain dead during childbirth) these babies become Bridge Babies. These BBs remain strangely connected to the world of the dead, so Sam is able to use his BB to power a wearable device that senses that invisible reality and alerts him to its dangers. Players will also need to care for this BB. When Sam's baby gets agitated, players will need to calm the child by rocking it using the PS4's motion controls.

At Gamescom, we were also introduced to a new character named Mama. Played by actress Margaret Qualley (*Once Upon a Time in... Hollywood*, *Fosse/Verdon*), Mama is the opposite of a still mother, because her baby was actually born on the "other side." Mama's baby can be seen floating through the environment as a barely visible shadow, and we watched it leave shadowy footprints as it crawled along the ceiling. While this child is far from normal, Mama still cares for her daughter and remains connected to the infant via an unseen umbilical cord. This also means that





Mama isn't able to travel anywhere while she is connected to her baby.

Sam will meet several other wild characters, like Mama, as he travels across a fractured and dystopian America. However, sometimes Sam will need to unload more than mail; at one point in the demo we watched Sam urinate on the grass. Peeing is an actual mechanic in the game – although Kojima was quick to point out that players will not be able to see Sam's genitals. We don't know the exact purpose of peeing, but Kojima teased that it can be used as a weapon somehow. Through the magic of Death Stranding's asynchronous multiplayer, players will be able to see the effects that others have on the world, and if enough people pee in the same spot "something good will happen later on." Of course, we don't know exactly what this means, but a digitized mushroom appeared after Sam peed on the ground at Gamescom, so perhaps peeing is tied into a survival mechanic.

We'll be seeing a lot more of Death Stranding at TGS and in the runup to its release in November. Kojima's games have always been a fount of wild and inventive ideas, and Death Stranding certainly isn't short on those. Now we just want to know how it feels to play. » **Ben Reeves**

UCA
UNITED CITIES OF AMERICA

Predator: Hunting Grounds

The jungle comes alive in this new asymmetrical shooter

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
5-Player Online

» **Publisher**
Sony

» **Developer**
IllFonic

» **Release**
2020

I effortlessly scale the tree, and make my way across the jungle canopy in a series of powerful strides. Below me, I hear the popping of automatic weapons. Rather than scurrying away to safety, I head toward the skirmish. Below, guerilla rebels are fighting a squad of other humans. I pop on my thermal vision, and the jungle greens give way to muted grays and blues, though the silhouettes of the fighters pop out in rainbow hues. I'm invisible, and as I drop down behind a distracted soldier I can only think of one thing: His skull is going to look great in my trophy cabinet.

Predator: Hunting Grounds is IllFonic's latest foray into asymmetrical action, after 2017's Friday the 13th: The Game. That previous effort was clearly a labor of love to the source material, but it was plagued with networking issues and other technical problems. The team says that project taught them some tough lessons, and my time with Hunting Grounds shows that they're applying that knowledge well.

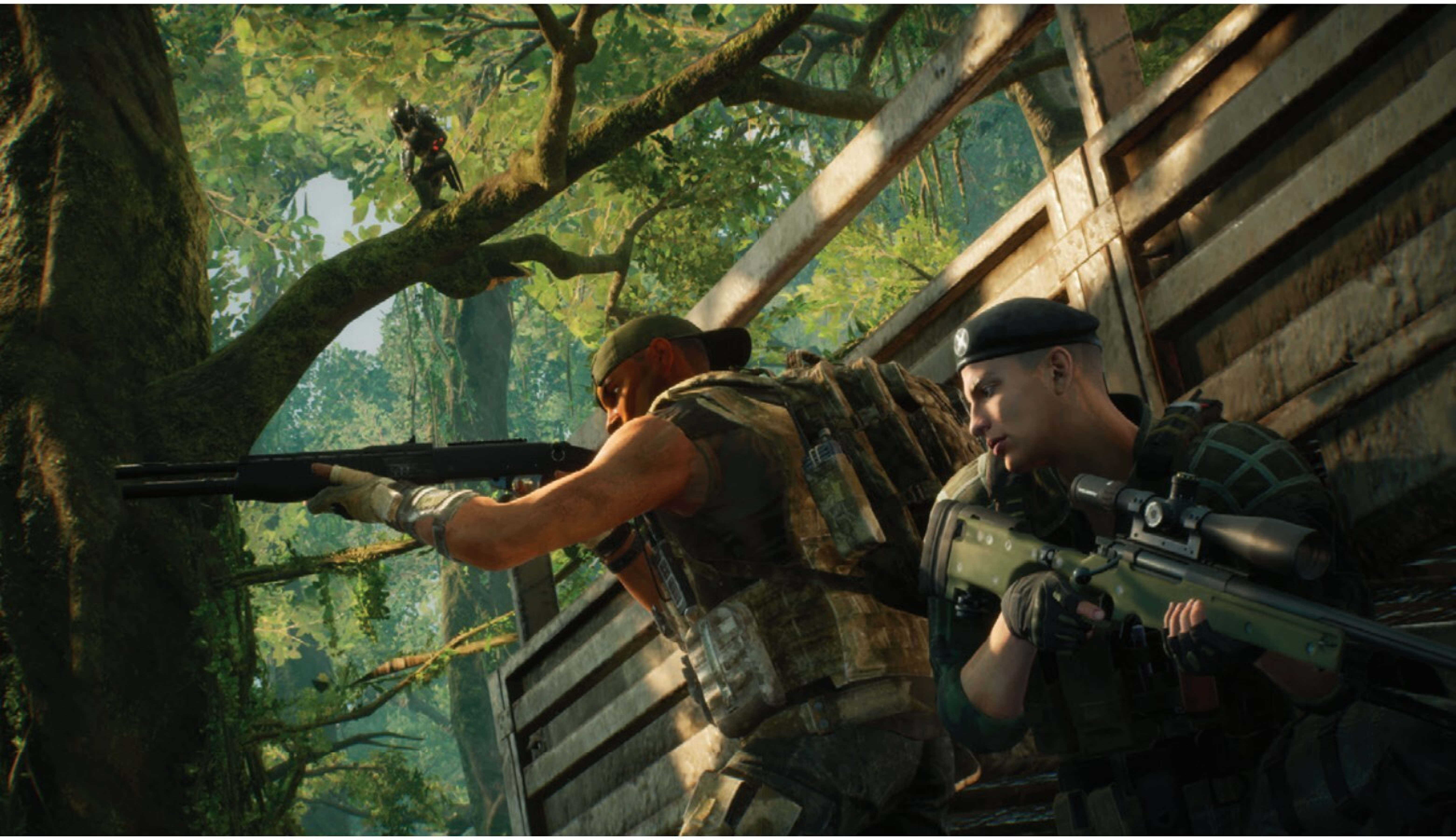
In Friday the 13th, playing as a scared teen wasn't quite as fun as stepping into Jason Voorhees' boots. Sure, you could use weapons to daze Jason and make a quick escape, but deciding to stand your ground was essentially courting a game-over screen. In Predator: Hunting Grounds, if you aren't playing as the titular creature, you're one quarter of a highly trained – and well-armed – squad of soldiers. After playing several rounds as both predator and prey, I'm confident in saying that it's not going to be a disappointment when you aren't assigned the role of the big bad.

When you're the predator, you have complete control over his arsenal from the first movie. IllFonic won't say if other loadouts will be available, such as the extendable spear or disc shooter from Predator 2, but I didn't feel underpowered with his 1987 incarnation. His shoulder cannon (complete with telltale tri-shaped beam) can be charged for a devastating attack, and his wrist blades make short work of anyone unlucky enough to get within melee range. You can also activate thermal vision and cloaking, but they consume a lot of energy; run out, and you're going to stick out like the giant alien thumb that you are. And even though you're agile, you don't want to engage if you don't have to.

Soldiers, on the other hand, have their own arsenals. There are four different loadouts to choose from, giving players access to a shotgun, longer-ranged rifles, and submachine guns. Take the predator by surprise, and you can wound him – complete with glowing green blood effects. From there, you can track the creature and finish him off. That is, unless he's able to duck away long enough to heal himself using his first-aid gadgets. It takes time to fully regenerate health, but it's an easy way to stay in the game.

While the humans can hold their own against the predator, that's not their main objective. Instead, they're dropped into the jungle in order to complete a series of tasks. Those objectives can vary depending on where the players go. In our session, we did some fairly basic things like starting generators and babysitting a satellite uplink while a virus was uploaded. All the while, we were being hunted by an unseen enemy player and A.I. rebels. It's tense and thrilling, and the final rush to evacuate safely had everyone in the demo room cheering. Everyone except for the predator, that is. They may have gotten away that time, but there's always another hunt on the horizon.

» **Jeff Cork**



Savior

Discover a hidden underground society

Weston Tracy has been in the game industry since the late '90s working on games like Tribes and Star Wars Starfighter, but Savior is the first game he is leading entirely. "I like to say as soon as I played Metroid on NES for the first time, I wanted to make a Metroid-vania," Tracy says. "I actually tried to wrangle my fellow fourth graders into making a game. One of them claimed to know how to program and of course it was a disaster, but it was a fun disaster."

Savior is different than the games Tracy has developed in the past, but it represents the kind of game he has been wanting to make for years, and he has spent the last four years plugging away at it between various freelance projects.

Savior takes place in a world divided. The Chosen is a powerful, tyrannical religious group that drops those who speak against it into a pit. Protagonist Sam begins her journey in the world above, but the course of the game can see her eventual banishment to the pit. "Hopefully that's not too close to Samus," Tracy says. "I am a big fan of the *West Wing* and I was going to call her Sam Seaborn, but instead of that, she's from a village by the sea and her people are called the seaborn."

Even if Samantha is banished, she can discover a full society underground made up of others who were sent away for protesting. Without the threat of The Chosen stifling them, this underground society is full of curious minds and have developed a technologically advanced society.

From there, Samantha can explore in any direction she pleases, unlock new items that expand her combat and navigation abilities, and develop relationships with everyone she meets. Everyone can become useful allies for Samantha, but the ways you build those friendships differ. Some decide they can't beat you in combat so they might as well join you, while others enlist after conversing or completing a task for them. "The way the world treats you changes," Tracy says. "People will trust you more, and as you get more abilities, teachers will consider you ready to learn the next thing."

Combat is inspired by games like Punch-Out and the Batman Arkham series, focusing on learning enemy patterns. Initial confrontations are difficult, but as you learn enemy tells, you can dispatch them quickly. Traversal is a different, less challenging story. "I love playing platformers, but I don't like precision platforming," Tracy says. "When you jump to a ledge, it will slightly adjust your trajectory to make you hit the ledge perfectly each time."

Tracy considers Savior to still be in pre-production, which means it will be some time before it releases, unfortunately. We will definitely see it on PC in the future, but Tracy says releasing the game on consoles (especially Switch) is a personal life goal, and he is optimistic about it appearing on other platforms. » **Kyle Hilliard**

» Platform
PC • Consoles (TBD)

» Style
1-Player Action

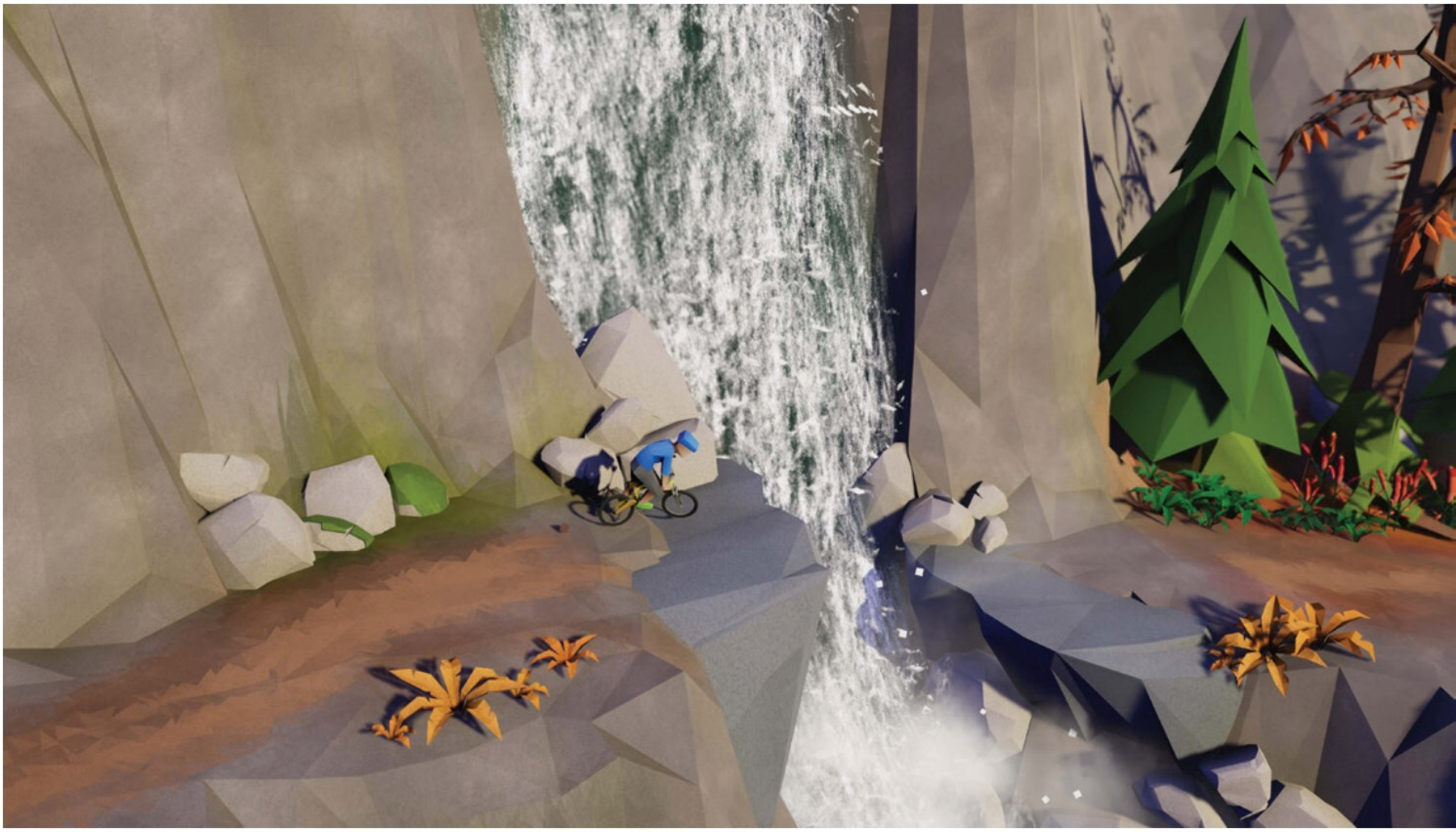
» Publisher
Starsoft Entertainment

» Developer
Starsoft Entertainment

» Release
TBD

Lonely Mountains Downhill

A shot at biking nirvana



» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
PC • Mac • Linux

» Style
1-Player Action/Sports

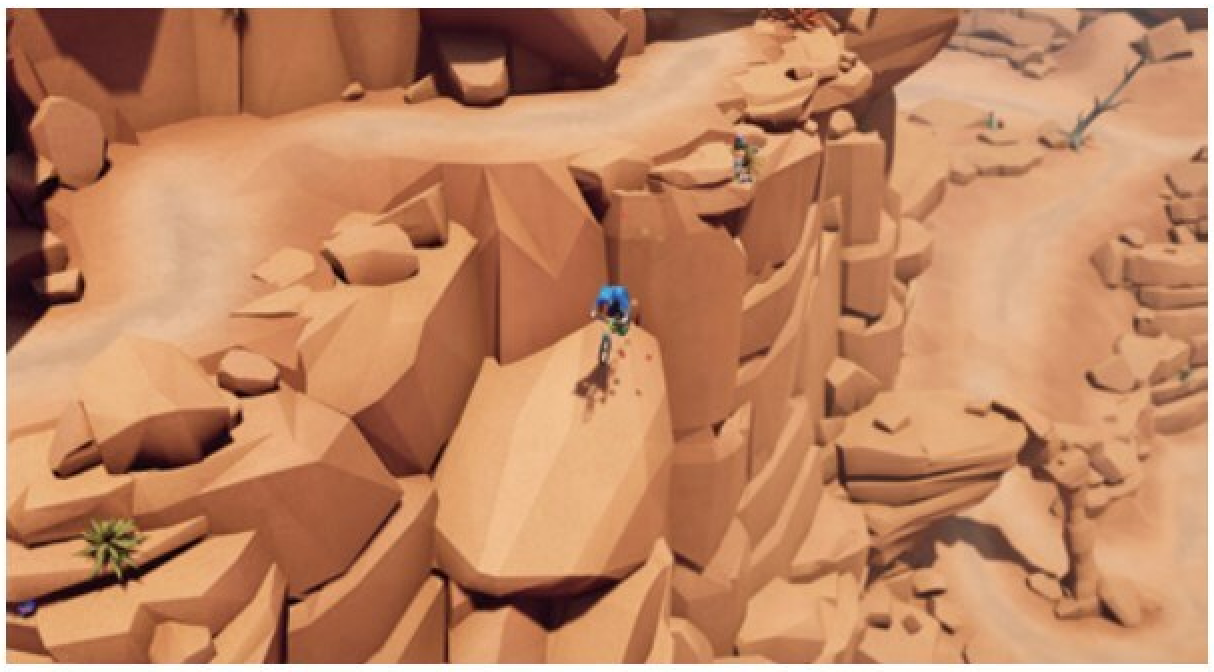
» Publisher
Thunderful

» Developer
Megagon Industries

» Release
Fall

I've had the chance to check in on the development of Lonely Mountains Downhill several times over the course of its creation, and each time, the title impresses me more. Even if you don't give a whit about mountain biking, this is a game that should be on your radar; stellar precision control, challenging time trials, and a flat-out gorgeous presentation of the natural world make it a standout.

You guide your biker down the fun part of the mountain-biking experience (who needs ascents?), sliding across boulders, soaring over gaps, and rattling over old wooden bridges as you weave your way down a tortuous mountain landscape. While a well-worn path often indicates the most common route of the bikers who have passed before you, the real challenge is finding the many shortcuts, quick drops, and deviations that will bring you to the next checkpoint in record time.



Attractive polygonal graphics lend an arcade sensibility, which is further aided by the similarity to classic games like Marble Madness, with an isometric view and endlessly descending stages. But here, the accompanying aesthetic is the rush of wind, the cry of birds, and the susurrus of falling leaves. The intense sense of speed and barely controlled momentum is juxtaposed against that Zen-like presentation to great effect. It's hard not to pause your careening descent at certain vistas, just to enjoy the gorgeous views and the atmospheric sound effects, which recall better than any game I can think of the joy of hiking or riding a secluded mountain trail.

Each run is accompanied by a selected challenge, like completing the trail before suffering 16 crashes, or hitting the finish line in less than two minutes. These challenges slowly unlock new parts for other bikes, new costumes for your rider, and new mountains and trails to tackle in your adventure. In its current form, many of these challenges are punishing to complete. I like to see that dynamic for sought-after cosmetics, but I worry a bit about locking new bikes and entire mountains behind some of those trials, and I'm curious how the developers might tweak the progression in the final lead-up to launch.

The mountains on display in the beta seem drawn from familiar landscapes, recalling idyllic locales like Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada range. Multiple trails snake down each of the environments, and there's no shortage of nooks and crannies to discover. Speed runners are going to delight at discovering the optimal path options, and it's great fun to learn the different bikes and how they each react differently to off-trail terrain, cornering, and big drops. Even the devastating crashes you inevitably face are fun.

The full scope of Lonely Mountains Downhill isn't yet on display in the beta I played, and any final analysis of the full experience will have to factor in the fun of the full progression, especially since this is exclusively a solo experience, and your main focus will be competing against your own times and the broader global leaderboards. Nevertheless, our hands-on time suggests the game has hit a sweet spot that is hard to resist. » **Matt Miller**

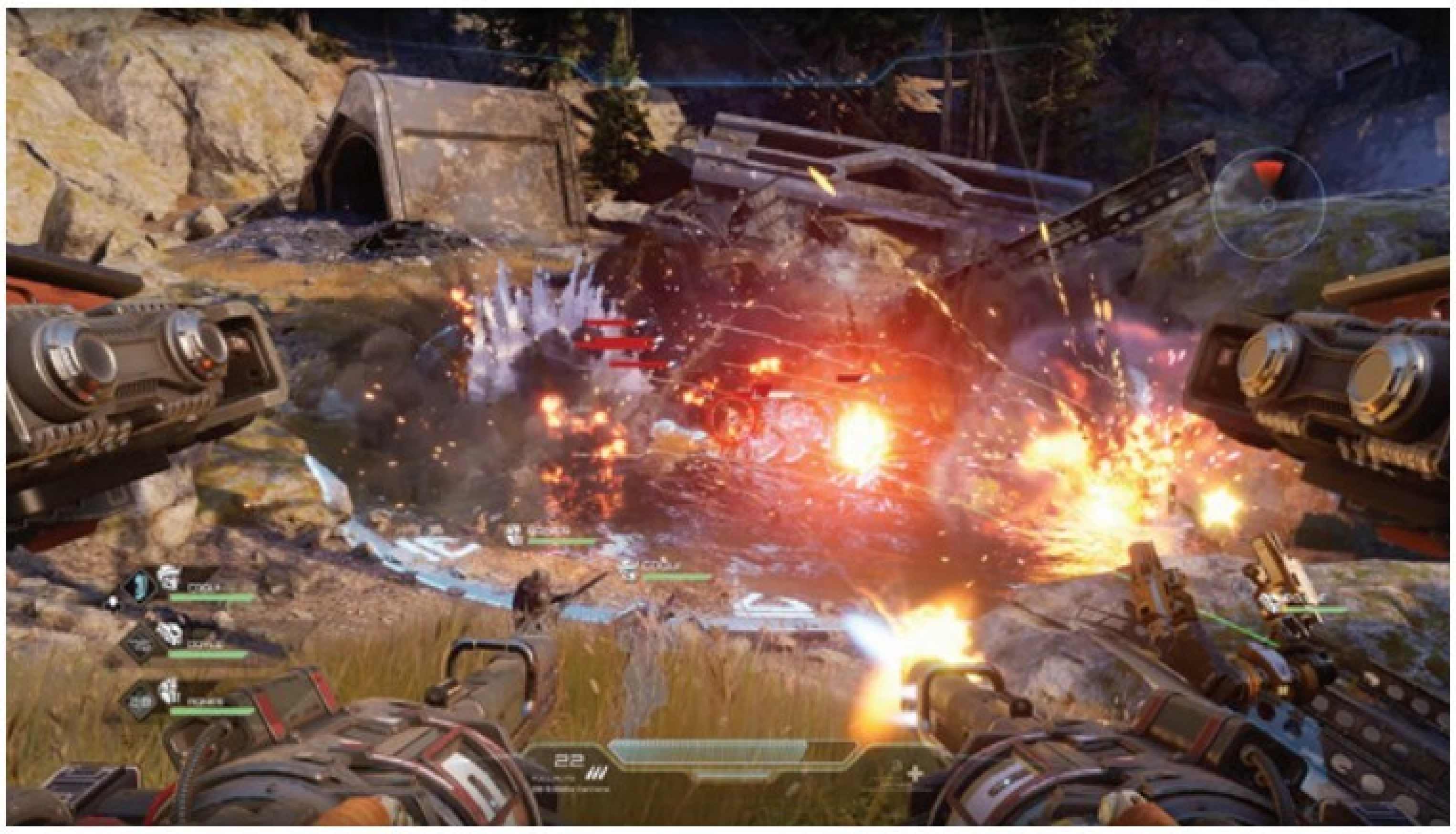
Disintegration

Calling and taking the shots from above

Disintegration takes a familiar conceit from tactically oriented games – the shot-caller who monitors the action from above – and adds a clever twist. "What we wanted to do was turn that camera in the sky into an active participant in combat," says V1 Interactive's co-founder, Marcus Lehto. The result, which I played at its Gamescom debut, smashes together FPS and tactical action to create a fascinating, fast-paced hybrid.

Players control a crew of A.I. companions, while keeping a watchful eye on the map. You're not just an observer, though; your vehicle, known as a grav cycle, is kitted out with both offensive weapons and defensive capabilities. As your crew of mechanized buddies scrambles on the ground below, you direct their actions by issuing commands via beacons and button presses while also taking out rivals with your own attacks. It's a tense feat of juggling, but it became second nature after only a few minutes of hands-on time.

Lehto says the sci-fi game features a complete single-player campaign, but that's not what's on display at the show. Instead, I'm dropped into one of the multiplayer modes, a take on capture the flag called Retrieval. Here, two teams of four take turns on attack and defense, trying to nab volatile power cores and deliver them past enemy lines before the payloads explode.



Players can choose between several themed crews, which Lehto likens to motorcycle gangs. These have their own cosmetic flair (the Sideshows are like maniacal clowns, while the Warhedz look like they were pulled straight out of Mad Max's world), as well as gameplay specializations. From the six crews I see in the demo, I pick the King's Guard, which gives me the ability to fire charged bolts as well as drop a mine that provides a slow healing trickle to allies that come within its range.

The match takes place in what looks like a refinery, with choke points to guard and side passageways to slip through if you're lucky. I hang back at first, doing my best to support the team with heals and taking shots when I can safely take them, but that strategy gets old after a bit. I find that I'm able to be far more aggressive than I initially thought, focusing on enemy grav cycles while my A.I. buddies provide solid backup. Both matches end in a draw, but I'm eager for more. Unfortunately, I'm out of time.

V1 Interactive is a small team of about 30 developers, which Lehto says is important. He says he's seen what can happen when studios get too large (he left Bungie in 2012), which is an experience he doesn't want to repeat. If this multiplayer demo is any indication, his team not only has some great ideas, but can potentially deliver on them, as well. » **Jeff Cork**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/Strategy (8-Player Online)

» Publisher
Private Division

» Developer
V1 Interactive

» Release
2020

Unexpected Roots

V1 Interactive's co-founder Marcus Lehto has quite the gaming pedigree. He co-created the Halo universe and worked at Bungie when you could squeeze the entire staff into an elevator. I asked if there were any connections between Disintegration and the primordial version of Halo. "When I first started working at Bungie, I was working on Myth: The Fallen Lords, which is a real-time tactics game. It was a really fun game to work on, and then when we moved onto Halo, that's exactly how it started – we were just reskinning Myth with a sci-fi skin to it before it took on its own life after that, as you well know. [Disintegration] actually started a little similar, as a spiritual successor to some of those roots of what I had done and worked on with the Myth franchise. That was the inspiration, initially, but that was the very, very groundwork. It quickly changed, and rather than you being the boots on the ground as well, it took on this role as the avatar in the sky."

The Surge 2

In search of a better sci-fi hellscape

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Focus Home Interactive

» Developer
Deck13

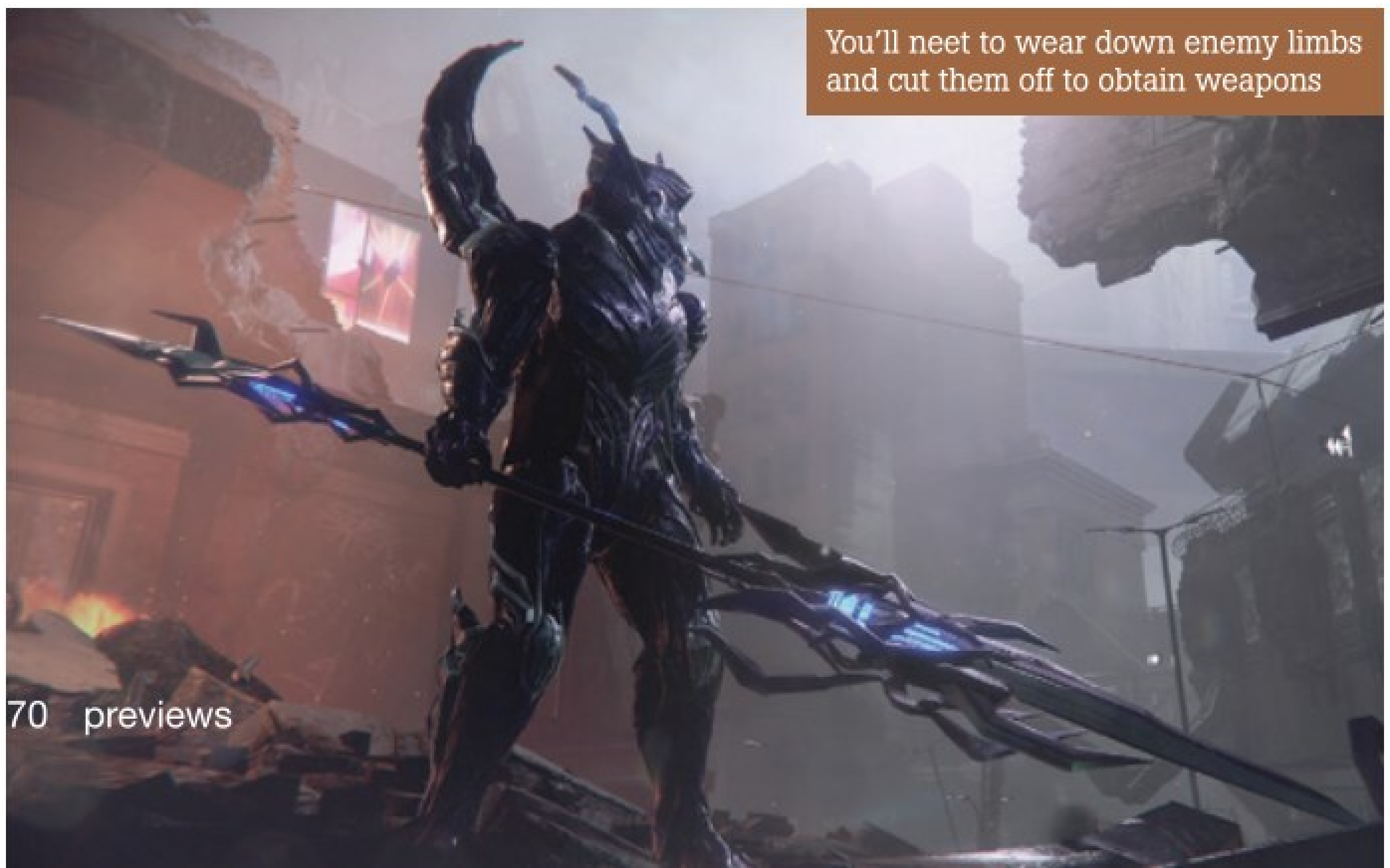
» Release
September 24

The original Surge emerged as a sci-fi take on Dark Souls, replacing demons with exosuit-wearing goons and caverns with a research facility. Even the satisfying dismemberment-focused combat couldn't hide the fact that the original game's repetition grated, the setting was dull, and the story wasted its promising themes about the human cost of technological progress. After some hands-on time with The Surge 2, it's clear that Deck13 has taken criticisms of the first to heart and is using what worked in that game as a launch pad for something more satisfying.

The Surge 2 opens with you waking up in a prison complex in the futuristic Jericho City that's under siege by some robotic force. Unlike the first Surge, you make your own character, man or woman, with a creator packed filled with impressive personalization options for face, hair, and body. From there, you make your way through the prison, armed with weaponized defibrators, electrifying and cutting your way through squads of rowdy prisoners. The combat hasn't undergone any major evolutions, with the goal still being to weaken limbs on foes until you can wear their health down to cut off that limb and steal the weapon it's holding. It's an engaging design, requiring you to tactically approach enemies, circling them, blocking and evading at just the right moments. These enemies hit hard, so every screwup is punished severely. However, persevere, and you'll be rewarded with an over-the-top gory finish as well as a new toy, like a sharp spear capable of poking enemies from afar.

Even with only a couple hours under my belt, Jericho City is already a vastly more satisfying environment than the ho-hum research facility setting of the original, with more color and interesting futuristic architecture on display. The enemies are also more vicious than the original game. The first boss fight, pitting you against the exosuit-wearing warden of the facility, leaves little room for error. While you had a fair amount of bulk and defense to work with in The Surge, the second seems like you're going to focus on speedy dodges rather than blocking if you want to survive. That said, if you're running up against trouble, you can always farm the environment to buy upgrades for health and weapon boosters to take the edge off.

Ultimately, I came away from my time with The Surge 2 optimistic about the improvements this Souls-like series is making for its second outing. I was criminally bored of the first game's environmental design and its protagonist within a couple of hours. However, Jericho City's ruined cityscape suggest I'll find the sequel's world more than enticing enough to keep chopping fools to bits for hours on end. » **Javy Gwaltney**



You'll neet to wear down enemy limbs and cut them off to obtain weapons

Grid

Back out on the track

Codemasters is rebooting the Grid franchise, which hasn't seen an installment since Grid Autosport in 2014. Despite the time off, the game is retaining its multi-discipline racing structure that encourages players to dip their toes into different series, whether it's getting behind the wheel of touring cars, muscle cars, tuners, prototypes, and more. While this 2019 entry in the series doesn't feature a story as in the original, landmark entry Pro Race Driver back in 2002, out on the track you'll create your legend thanks to the game's relationship systems.

Grid contains 72 teammates you can hire and fire at various points throughout your climb to the top. The A.I. behavior of these racers varies. Some will be more aggressive in their driving while others might look to you to call the shots as you both move up the field. Of course, the flipside of this is that a more stubborn teammate might look to grab glory for themselves, possibly at your expense. You're going to have to find the sweet spot, as the better the both of you do the more it helps you progress.

The game features more than 150 events, boss battles, and the Grid World Series, which, as the pinnacle of your career, combines the various race types into one mammoth gauntlet. Getting there is thankfully not linear in that you can switch between the various series, unlocking more content as you go. Like in previous Grid titles, you gain XP for what you do on the track, whether that's drafting, passing, or putting in clean laps, further fueling your progress.

Of course, it's not always going to be an orderly affair. Just as you manage your teammate during a race, you're also going to make some enemies on the track due to your driving. Nemesis racers look for payback during races, and although they don't carry over from race to race, you'll have to deal with the consequences by paying for damages incurred to your car because of your racing and possibly nemesis racers giving as good as they've got.

Codemasters also has multiplayer and customization options in store for Grid, although at the time of this writing, it hasn't divulged exactly what is happening in those departments. However, these areas, like the game's graphics and lighting (which appear top-notch), are ways in which the game can make up for lost time during the series' hiatus. Hopefully Grid's online component can continue where Grid Autosport's left off last generation, with clubs, challenges, and livery creation. Anything less would be a disappointing step back.

Codemasters has made good progress with its F1 and Dirt Rally series, going after sim-focused racers through slightly niche forms of racing. The return of Grid, however, is an opportunity to snag more casual gamers looking for a wider breadth of racing as well as the opportunity to make some friends and enemies out on the track. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Codemasters

» **Developer**
Codemasters

» **Release**
October 11

Griftlands

Keeping your mind (and your blade) sharp

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Klei Entertainment

» **Developer**
Klei Entertainment

» **Release**
2020

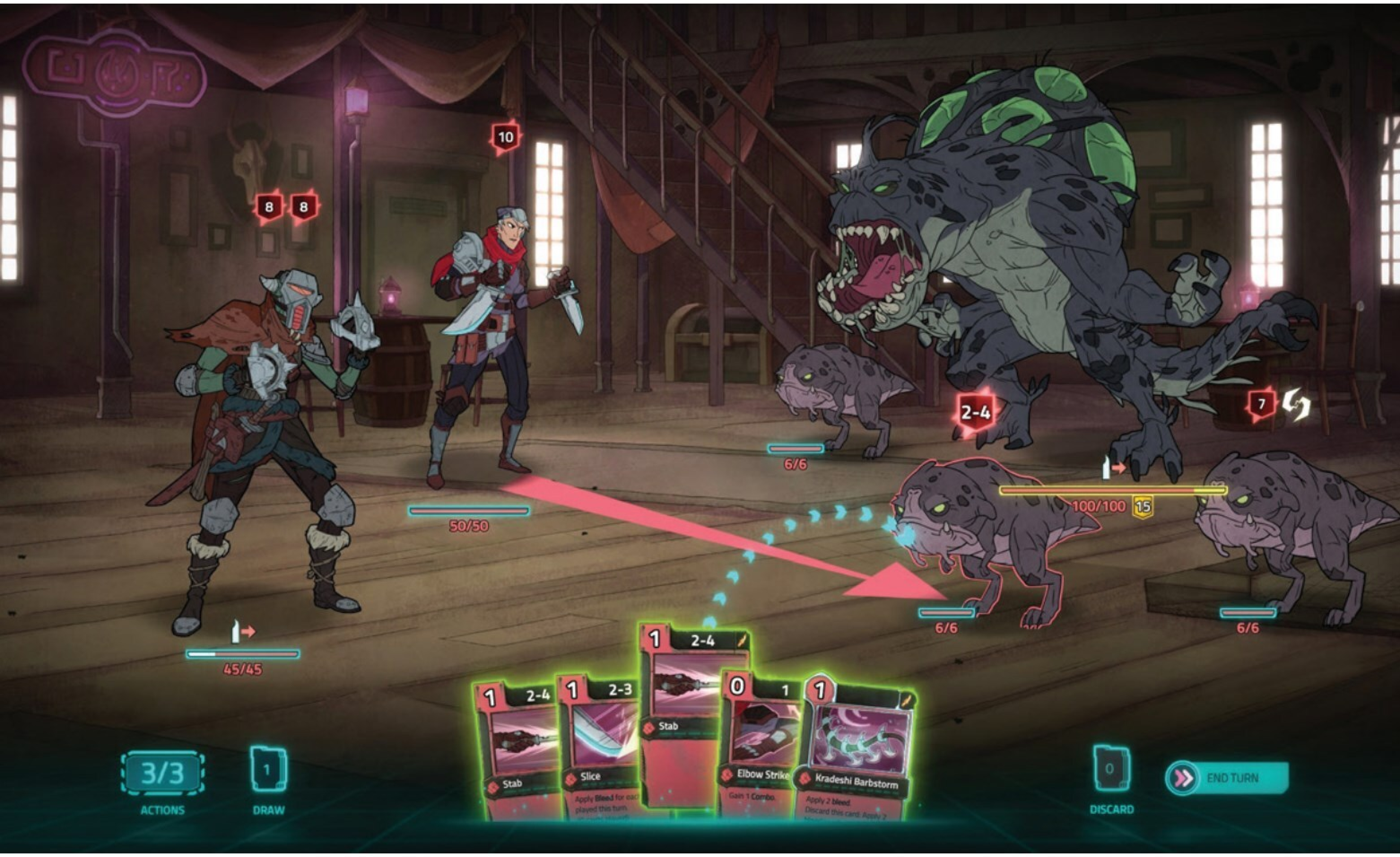
Klei Entertainment's most distinguishing feature as a developer, outside of its eye-catching art style, is the company's habit of embracing new genres. From stealthy ninja simulators to otherworldly survival sims and cyberpunk-espionage-tactics games, Klei has never shied away from taking on something entirely different than what's come before. Such is the case with Griftlands, a deck-building rogue-like RPG that has you trying to survive a harsh city of the future with only your wits and brawn to guide you.

The inspiration from last year's critical darling Slay the Spire is pretty obvious from the get-go. After selecting a character (only Sal, a former indentured servant returning to the city for revenge, is available in the Early Access version), you have to complete odd jobs in bars to progress through the story. One of these jobs might be bodyguarding a merchant as they transport some goods through the city, while another might have you trying to convince someone to change their behavior. As you fight or bluster your way through encounters, cards are added to your battle and negotiation decks.

Negotiation and battles, though they use different decks and have different attacks, mostly boil down to the same goal: You're trying to wear down your enemy's HP. In battles, this happens literally, with you (as well as whatever party members you've acquired) attacking foes with whatever cards that come into your hands each turn serving as the moves. In negotiation, your goal is to wear down your opponent's confidence to convince them to join you. The uniformity across these two kinds of gameplay is ultimately satisfying because they give you multiple avenues to tackle a problem. If your resolve (your negotiation HP) is down, for example, you can have a physical battle to fall back on. Both sets of battles are entertaining, with card abilities, such as sacrificing HP to draw more cards, keeping things interesting and providing a number of opportunities for you to pull out a clever, close-call victory. The fact that you'll have to restart your whole run if you lose also makes battles incredibly tense.

The Mos Eisley-like setting of Havaria (presented as a 2D map that you navigate by clicking places of interest) is an enticing one filled with a memorable cast of characters that go beyond roguish stereotypes. Everyone, from the gruff guard you encounter to friendly bartenders and sly crimelords, are people trying to get by. This makes interacting with them particularly interesting. Charm or intimidate some of them and they'll join your party, while others will give you discounts at merchant stores and buy you drinks that restore your health. The tidbits of lore in Griftlands so far, including a mysterious religion called the Hess, are also intriguing and make Havaria a world worth getting to know.

Griftlands is still a long a way from being finished, with June 2020 being targeted as the full version release. That version will include more playable characters with storylines besides Sal, other decks, and difficulty modes. However, the snippet available in the Early Access version is a strong foundation for what could be a fantastic narrative-driven roguelike. » **Javy Gwaltney**



Humankind

Recreate history

With the Endless Legend and Endless Space franchises under its belt, Amplitude Studios has already taken a deft hand toward bringing the modern day 4X (explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate) to the forefront of PC gaming. Now Amplitude takes another approach outside of the fantastical and futuristic, bringing all of the world's history to bear with Humankind. While much is owed to one of the grandfathers in the genre, Civilization, Amplitude is making new choices here that set it apart on your journey from nomadic beginnings to the Bronze Age and beyond.

Your journey starts from humble beginnings, scrounging around for food and hunting nearby valleys and mountains. As always, determining where to settle your first city is a major decision. Will you embrace the lush life-giving waters of a nearby river for more sustenance? A centrally located settlement filled with gobs of resources? Or perhaps an encampment high in the mountains, assuring that any attackers will have an uphill battle. Whatever the case, the game shows off its massive customization potential as you begin your civilization and select your first culture.

Amplitude allows you to select from a wide variety of cultures in each "age" to build up a highly specialized civilization over the course of a game, bringing the bonuses of each to every era after. Over 60 different cultures are available from the Egyptians to the Vikings, spanning all the way to the modern world. Cultures come with unique units and special bonuses, so one obvious tactic is to stack similar bonuses to surge toward one unified strategy, like selecting cultures that all contain trade or economy bonuses to create a wealthy nation. There's an important catch, though – once a culture is selected by anyone in the game, that culture is unavailable to anyone else, so being scrappy and willing to change based on your opponent's decisions is critical to success.

Of course, winning by taking over the world via military might isn't the only solution. You may choose to chase down a "fame" victory instead, which considers many more aspects of play outside of a traditional "wonder" or theocratic victory – fame points can be acquired through many choices, moral decisions, civilization greatness, and even epic victories on the battlefield.

Mixing and matching cultures to create your own perfect world is the name of the game in Humankind, and I can't wait to create an Egyptian/Roman/German tribe of warriors to enlighten the world when the game launches in 2020. » **Daniel Tack**

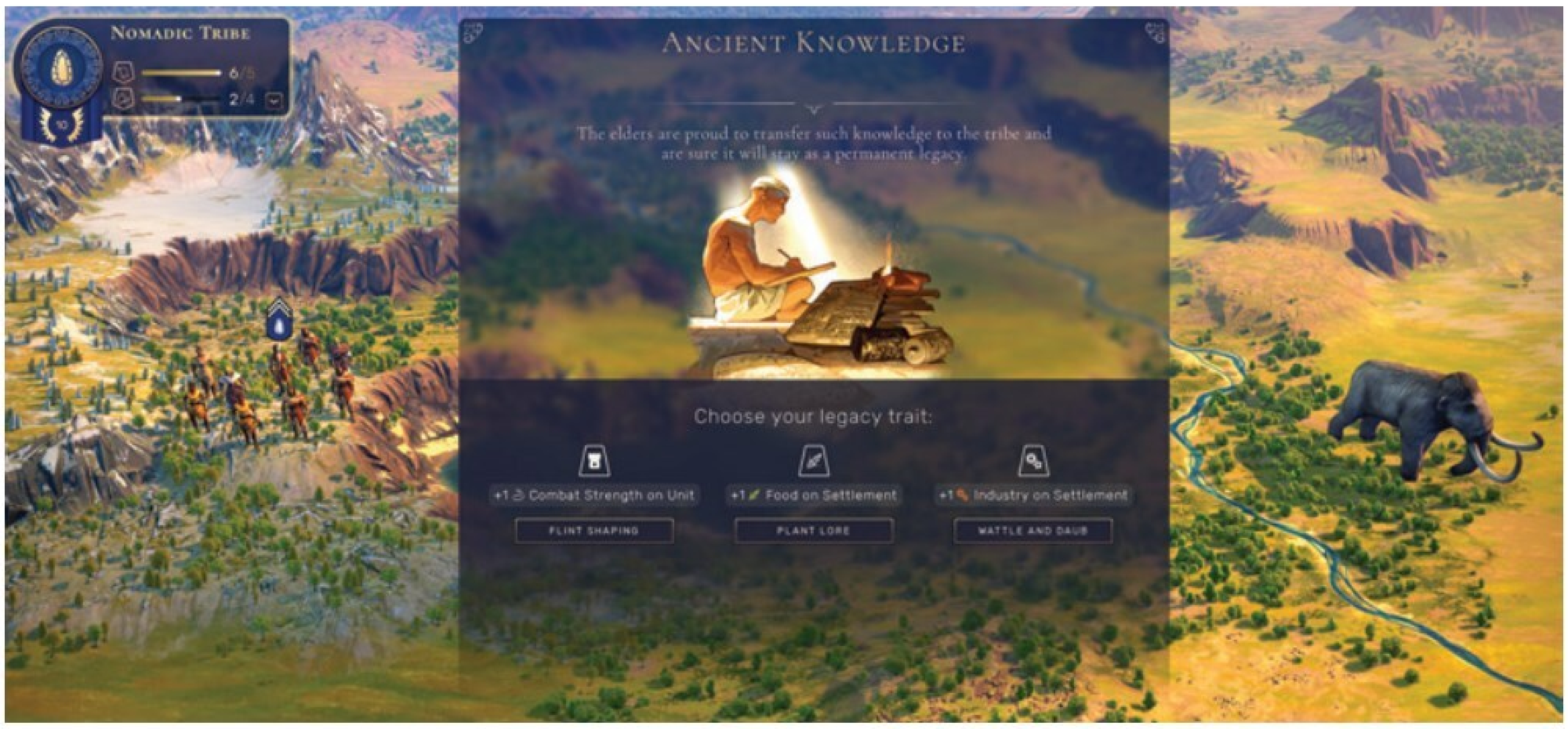
» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy

» Publisher
Sega

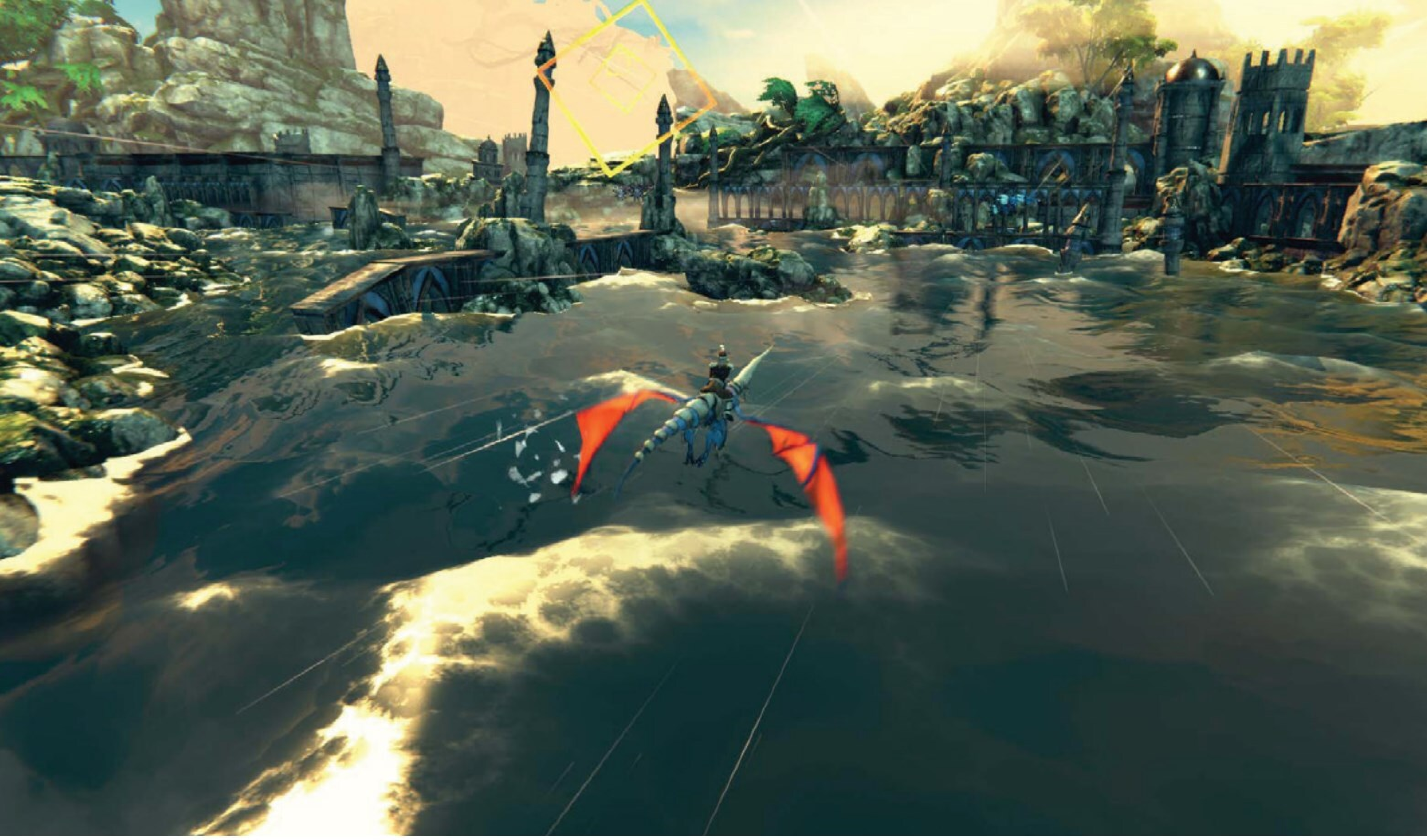
» Developer
Amplitude

» Release
2020



The elders are proud to transfer such knowledge to the tribe and are sure it will stay as a permanent legacy.

Choose your legacy trait:



Panzer Dragoon: Remake

Back on the rails

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Shooter

» Publisher
Forever Entertainment

» Developer
Megapixel Studio

» Release
Winter

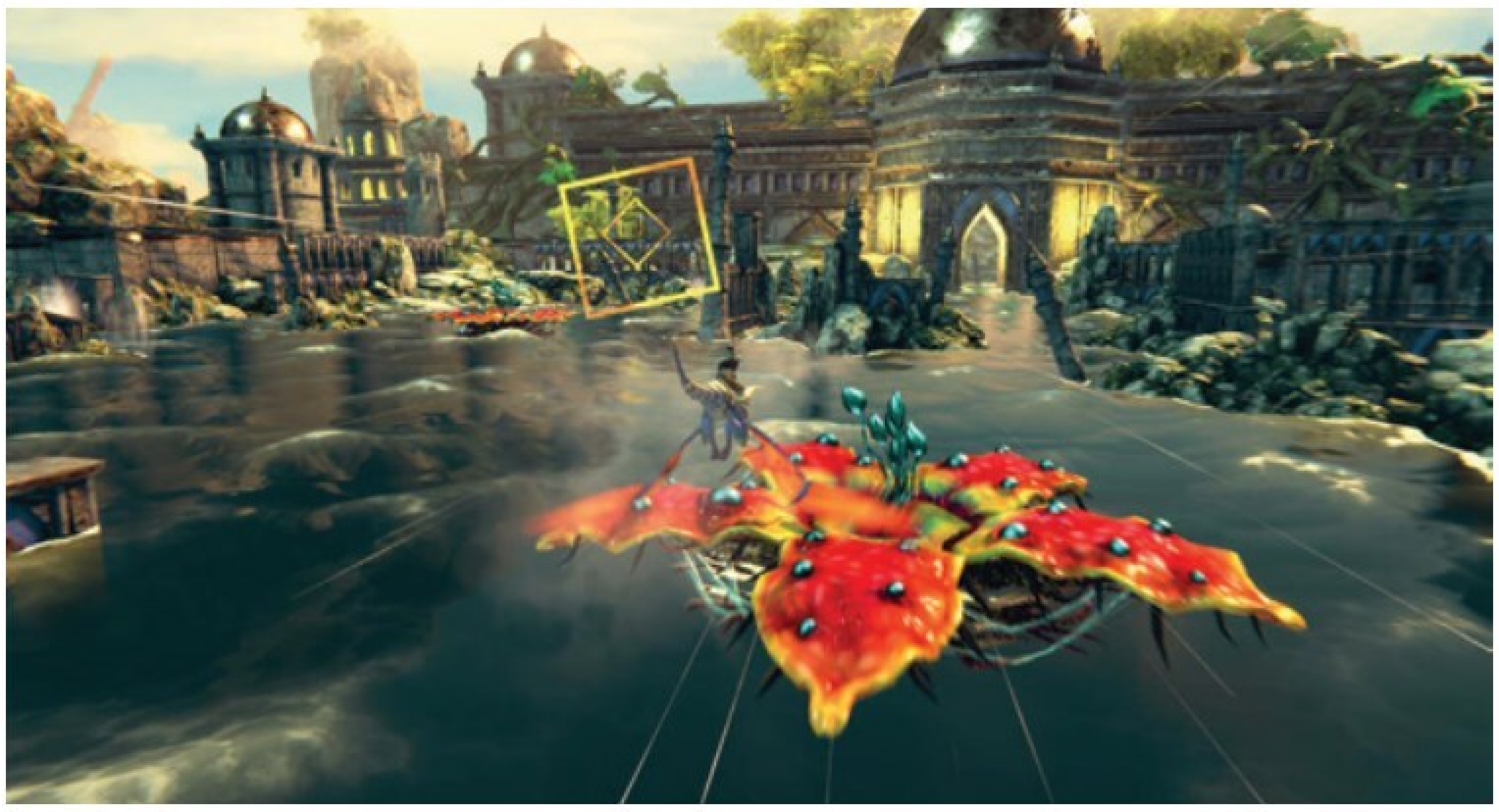
When Panzer Dragoon first released on the Sega Saturn in 1996, the industry was still experimenting with how to navigate three-dimensional space. One potential solution restricted player movement through the environment by setting them on predetermined paths. These kinds of on-rails shooters are no longer in vogue, but Megapixel Studio hopes to recapture the twitchy thrills of blasting monsters from the sky when it dusts off Sega's fantasy shooter later this year.

"As Panzer Dragoon fans, we really wanted to play the game again, especially on Switch," says head of publishing Benjamin Anseaume. "The idea is to stay extremely close to the original and make it look modern and graphically up-to-date. We will add a few features, like different difficulty modes, filters to customize the look, and leaderboards to compare your score with other players, but no major changes will be made to the gameplay as we want a very true-to-the-original experience."

Set on an alien post-apocalyptic planet, Panzer Dragoon is the story of a young hunter named Keil who takes to the skies on the back of a powerful dragon. After Keil encounters a dying dragon-rider, the young hunter assumes the rider's mission to chase down a dark dragon and prevent the beast from entering an ominous black tower where it can awaken an ancient power.

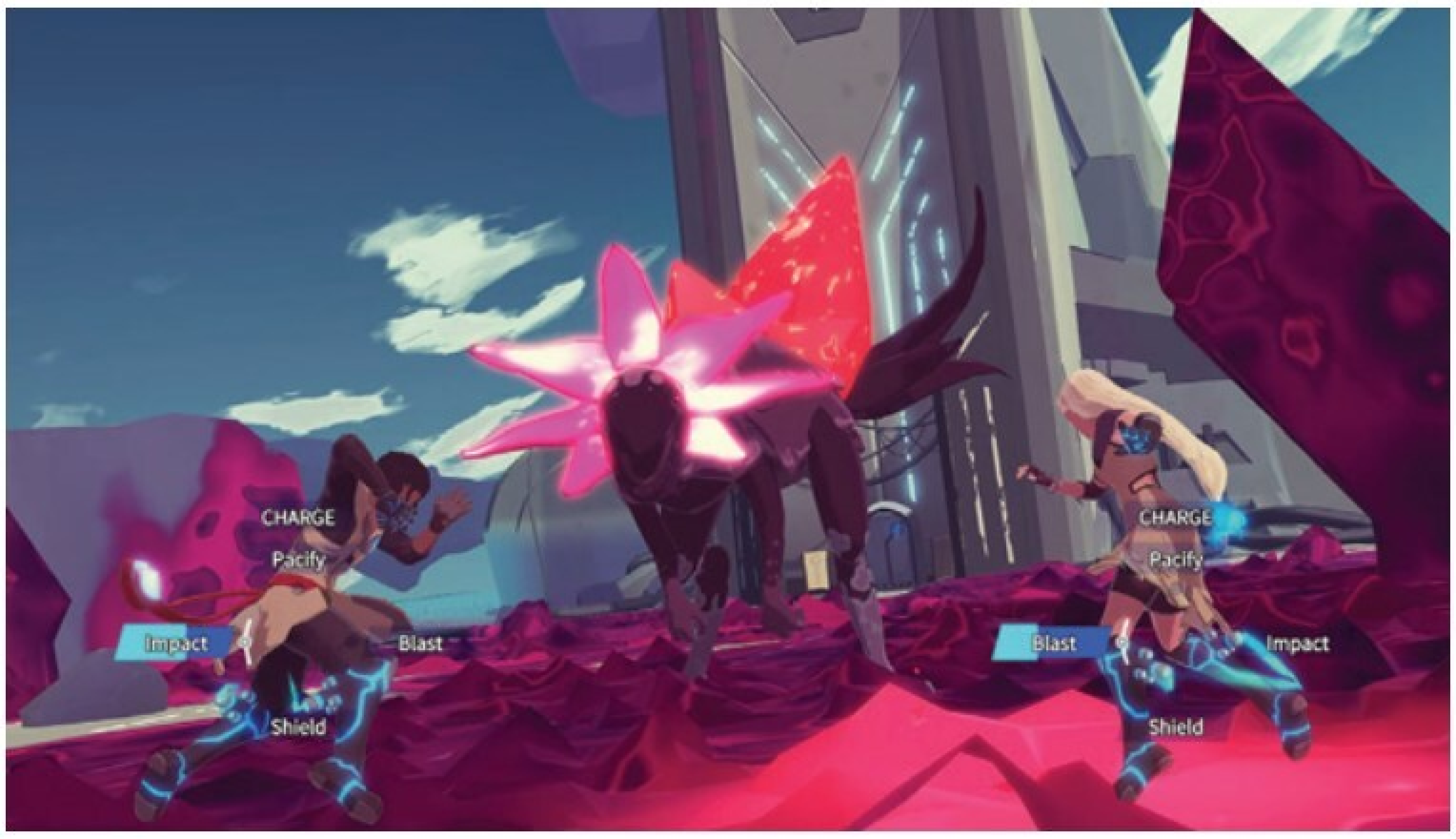
True to the original Saturn release, the remake of Panzer Dragoon will allow players to fly through seven exotic levels, ranging from tropical ocean cities to crumbling subterranean ruins. Keil is equipped with an advanced blaster, which he can use to shoot oncoming hordes of man-sized wasps, massive sandworms, and fleets of ancient airships. Keil can also use his dragon to lock onto multiple enemies at once and take them all down in a shower of fireworks. Panzer Dragoon's rhythmic combat remains relatively untouched, but Megapixel has rebuilt the game from the ground up to overhaul the shooter's dated visuals.

"[The original Panzer Dragoon games] released on a device that was not widely distributed," says Anseaume. "It's true that the genre has declined in the past 10 years. I think players want more freedom and possibilities when they play a game. The trend is open worlds, not really games on tracks, but I think that Panzer Dragoon revolutionized the genre, and the franchise is capable of giving it a second youth." **» Ben Reeves**



Haven

Space-age romance



In 2016, indie studio The Game Bakers released Furi, a fast-paced hack-and-slash with a high difficulty ramp. After the release of such an intense action game, The Game Bakers were excited to dive into something more relaxed and heartfelt. They wanted to create a love story.

"We wanted to make a very accessible, feel-good game," says co-founder and executive producer Audrey Leprince. "We had wanted to make a love story for a long time, and Haven is basically this story of a couple who escapes to a lost planet to be together … They are trying to escape from this threat, and they are just trying to set up on a new planet and start a new life."

Unlike a lot of love stories that focus on the journey of two people as they fall in love, Haven is a love story centered on an established relationship. When the game begins, the main characters Yu and Kay are already in a committed relationship. As a result, The Game Bakers hopes to explore the trials and beauty inherent to long-term relationships. Yu is a hothead engineer who is always ready to fight and Kay is a calm and collected scientist who likes to plan every move. Watching this couple navigate the struggles of their relationship as they battle alien life on a mysterious planet should offer a unique take on the traditional love story.

As Yu and Kay work to nurture their relationship, they're also nurturing their new home. Throughout the couple's journey, these fugitives discover a wide variety of collectibles, which they can use to upgrade their equipment and create new healing items. Those curative items are important, since their new planet is teeming with aggressive wildlife. A purple corruption has spread across the land, and this mysterious essence is further agitating the planet's beasts, so Yu and Kay will need to dispel the corruption before they build a lasting homestead.

"It's a very accessible RPG," says Leprince. "We call it a mix between Journey and Persona, because it has the drifting and the feel-good, flying-over-the-grass mechanics of exploring a world like Journey. Navigating the world is a bit like skiing over the slopes. And then there is the classic RPG part with exploration and combat, and also a lot of dialogue and narration."

At the start of the game, players won't get to choose to play as either Yu or Kay. Instead, they control both characters at the same time. One character's attacks are mapped to the controller's face buttons while the other's moves are mapped to the d-pad. Battles play out in real time as players issue commands and chain together combos using both characters. At the same time, Haven supports drop-in, drop-out couch co-op, and The Game Bakers hope players will navigate the hills of this alien world with one of their own loved ones.

Haven is a gorgeous-looking game with a lot of style. Combining Journey's open exploration with traditional RPG mechanics could be a powerful combo. Haven might offer a sweeping emotional journey for one, or you could play it with your own special someone and experience a personal romance of your own. » **Ben Reeves**

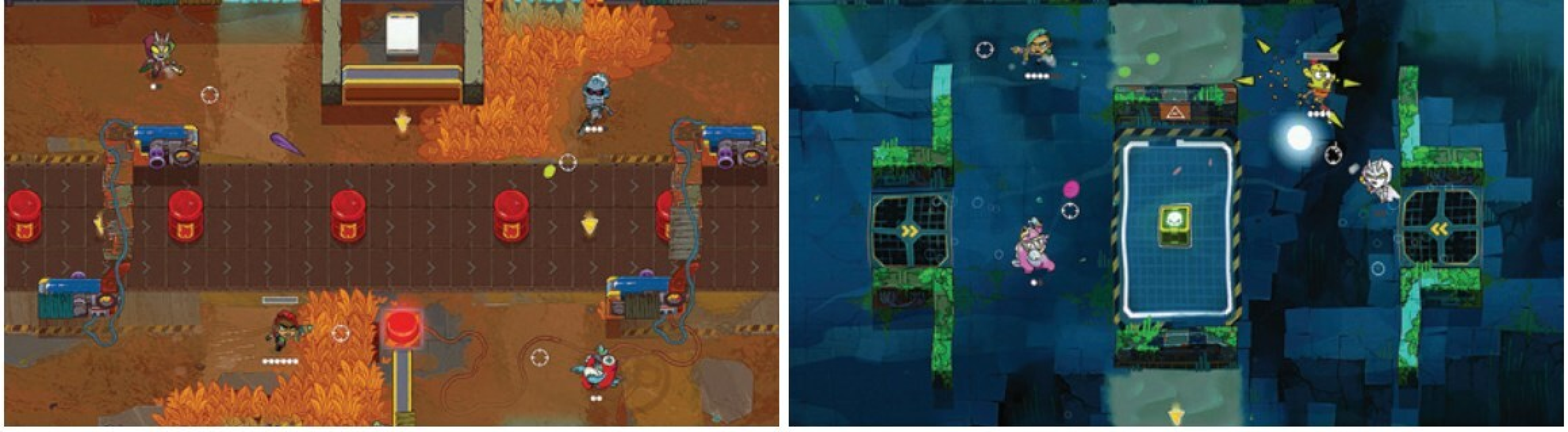
» Platform
PS4 • Switch • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action/Role-Playing

» Publisher
The Game Bakers

» Developer
The Game Bakers

» Release
2020



Hot Shot Burn

Trick-shots with friends

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
2 to 4-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Artifex Mundi

» Developer
Flaming Flamingo

» Release
2019

Hot Shot Burn is a four-player arena shooter that's simple for your friends to grasp its basics when you have them over for a party, but might have just enough depth to keep them playing the whole night. Though it's currently in its Early Access phase on Steam, there's already enough here to keep multiplayer fiends busy.

The concept is fairly simple if you've played other round-based multiplayer games. Four players start out on one of a few arenas with the goal of being the last man standing. Rather than focus purely on winning rounds, however, your goal is to earn a certain number of points across several rounds, then win a round to lock in your victory.

You get a good chunk of points if you win a round, sure, but also if you manage to kill whoever's in the lead. There are also small gems scattered around each arena, and while nabbing one won't get you too many points, they add up across rounds, and could put you over the points threshold.

You still need to win a round to close out a game, however, so at some point, you'll have to face your foes. Each of the six currently-playable characters has a couple of tricks at their disposal, giving you multiple ways to play. The insect-like Luna can charge up her short-range shots to give them more range and staying power, and can also turn translucent to make her harder to find (she's still technically visible, but very hard to see and keep track of). Wizardo, meanwhile, can lob fireballs and lay down a teleporter he can activate to warp back to wherever he dropped it.

Each arena also introduces a twist or two. One underwater level slows down all player movement, while another has pink-coated walls that reflect any shots that hit them. Combine this with Luna's charged-up rounds, and you might be able to score some trick shots as you bounce bullets off the walls.

Hot Shot Burn's rounds go by quickly, and the devious stage hazards and character abilities make learning the ins and outs on the fly pretty fun. It's tough to say whether the action will keep me engaged long-term, hopefully the early-access period will add more depth in the coming months. » **Suriel Vazquez**

Maiden And Spell

Bullet hell is other people

» Platform
PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action

» Publisher
Maple Whispering Limited

» Developer
Mino_dev LLC

» Release
2019

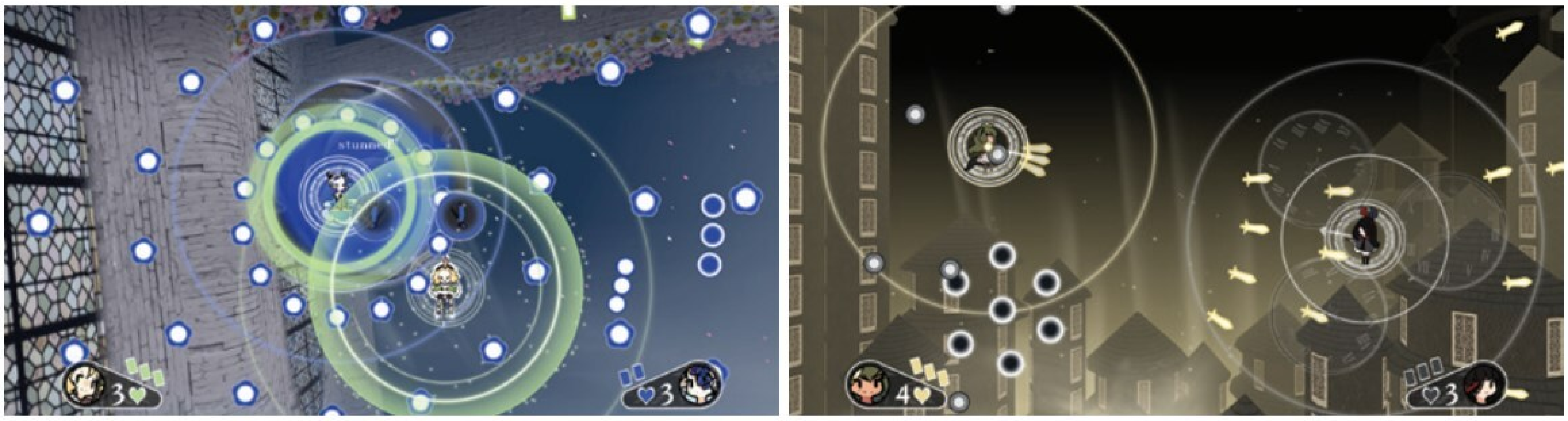
The bullet-hell shooter genre is about weaving your way through delicately-laid patterns that, while difficult to navigate, have a predictable rhythm to them. Which is why a multiplayer version of the genre where two players create these patterns for each other on the fly, sounds so intriguing.

Maiden and Spell casts you as one of six magical girls, who can each create their own kind of living bullet-hell for their opponent. Your "attacks" are all bullet patterns, all of which vary in speed and power. Your default attack might be a four-directional flower of green lightning bolts you can spam quickly, but if you want to summon an enormous moon that sweeps downward across the field, you're going to have to wait a little while between uses.

Other clever tricks have you creating a clone of yourself that lets you cast attacks from multiple locations at once, or create a minefield of red diamonds your opponent has to move out of. My first few rounds were tough, as I had no idea what to expect from my opponent, but as I learned their patterns, I was able to anticipate their moves and duck out of them pre-emptively.

Each match starts you out with three lives, and you have a short invincibility period after you come back to life. This made some matches a quick rout as my opponent couldn't catch wind of how I was layering my attacks on top of each other, but also let me make a clutch comeback by wising up and exploiting the cracks in an opponent's strategy.

A free demo of the game includes four characters to try it out, as well as some single-player challenges to test your bullet-dodging skills. You're going to want a primer, as Maiden and Spell's matches get tense and chaotic pretty quickly. » **Suriel Vazquez**



Heroland

Becoming an RPG tour guide

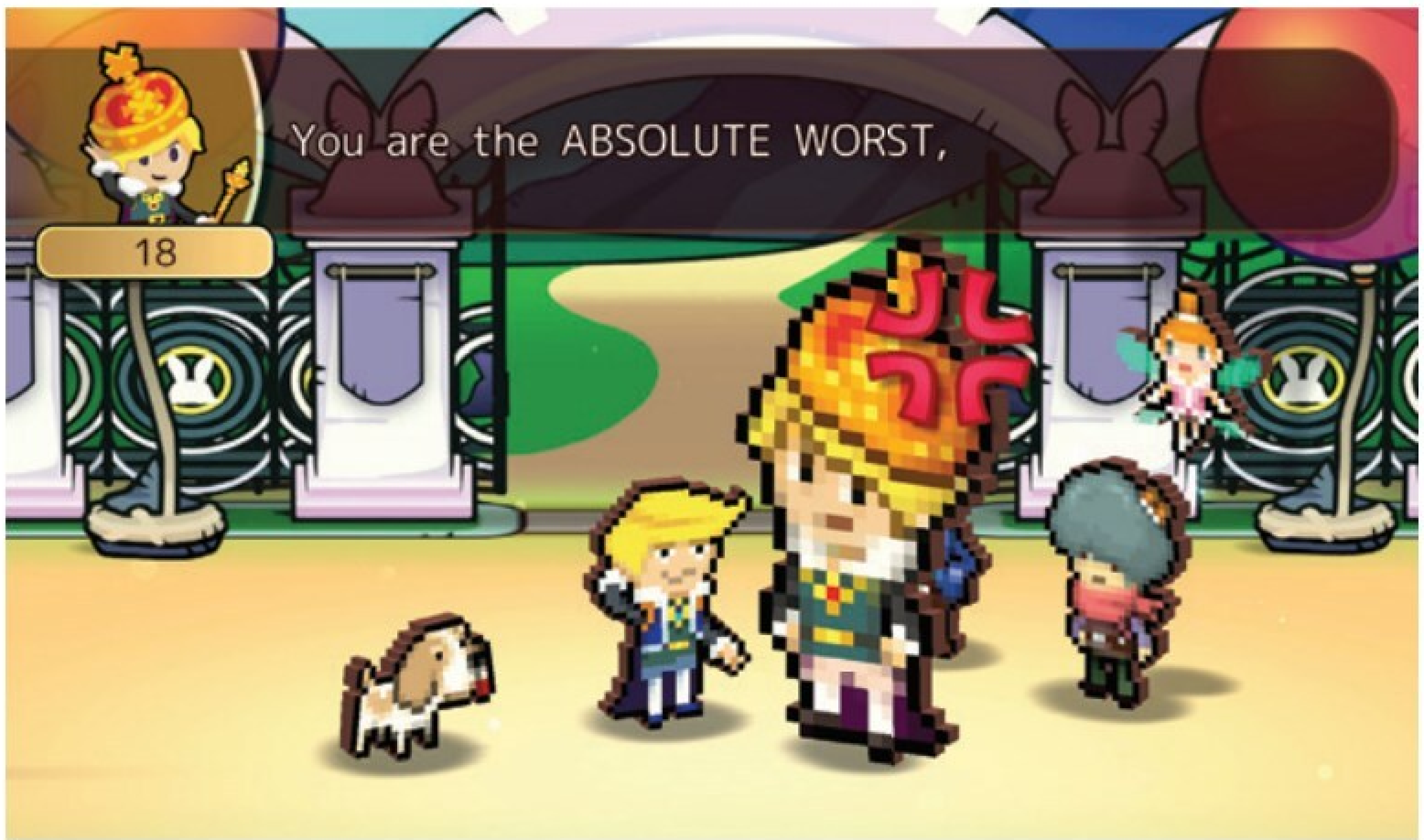
Embarking on a quest to save the world is a matter of life and death in most RPGs, but what if you could make a vacation out of it? That's the charming premise of Heroland, which comes from the minds of developers who worked on beloved games such as Mother 3, Legend of Mana, and Fantasy Life. The influence of these prior works shines through in Heroland's quirky sense of humor, vibrant 2D landscapes, and creative setup.

In Heroland, you're transported to a theme park that lets anyone take part in their own RPG adventure, allowing them to explore dungeons, defeat baddies, and slowly build their character up to legendary heights. However, your job is a bit less glamorous, as you are a tour guide just trying to feed your family. Your first big task? Making sure a prestigious prince's visit is everything he desires. The journey reveals there's more to Heroland's history than meets the eye, with plenty of mysteries to unravel. Throughout the game, you meet 20 quirky characters who can be party members, and all have their own unique stories, from a high-school girl to a short-tempered otter.

I played a brief demo and what's most interesting is how much coaching you do in the role of a guide. While Heroland has your basic turn-based RPG combat, instead of participating in it, you're basically calling the shots from the sidelines. The party executes their actions automatically, but you can step in to direct them to do things like use an item or execute a different action. Your job is to make sure they are happy and having fun.

With a cool art style, humorous dialogue, and a spin on the standard turn-based formula, Heroland is worth keeping an eye on. After all, it's not every day you get to visit an RPG theme park that revels in its eccentricity.

» **Kimberley Wallace**


You are the ABSOLUTE WORST,
18

» **Platform**
PS4 • Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Xseed Games

» **Developer**
FuRyu

» **Release**
Fall

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reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

88 Astral Chain

PlatinumGames once again finds clever ways to innovate on stylish action, this time giving the player control of two characters at once to create hard-hitting duets. Astral Chain also dazzles with its world building, characters, and wealth of variety. This is yet another Switch release that you won't want to miss.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Anyone who says they understand Death Stranding.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

WANDER > WONDER
Corolla
DJB 952

The Greater Than Ever Corolla

With an all-new sleek design and Toyota Safety Sense™ 2.0[1] standard, your journey can be stylish and safe, wherever you might be headed. ***Let's Go Places.***

Prototype shown with options. [1] Drivers are responsible for their own safe driving. Always pay attention to your surroundings and drive safely. System effectiveness is dependent on many factors including road, weather and vehicle conditions. See *Owner's Manual* for additional limitations and details. ©2019 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

Monster Hunter World: Iceborne

Tough challenges in the bitter cold

8.25

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept
Give Monster Hunter fans more of what they love in an icy new environment

» Graphics
Majestic creature designs still hold the most allure, and the new region capitalizes on its wintery backdrop, but you retread it (and areas from the base game) a lot

» Sound
Ambient nature sounds and roaring monsters help with immersion, but the voice acting is still hit or miss

» Playability
The basic controls are practically identical to Monster Hunter World's. The new moves and slinger combos are easy to grasp and fun to use

» Entertainment
Iceborne is a hefty expansion that provides a bigger, badder challenge. The fights can be both exhilarating and maddening, making it an experience of intense highs and lows

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** September 6 **Rating** T

Monster Hunter World reached a wider audience than any other game in the franchise, mesmerizing new hunters and pleasing longtime veterans. World had its extreme challenges, but they were tucked away in late- and post-game content. You didn't have to be an expert to succeed, which made it more newcomer-friendly. If you were waiting to have your skills truly tested, Iceborne scratches that itch; you have to fight hard for your victories, but you savor them when you finally slay a punishing beast. Iceborne gave me a larger adrenaline rush than I ever experienced in World's base game, but it's mirrored with just as many frustrating moments. Even so, Iceborne exemplifies what Monster Hunter is all about: You pull all the stops to overcome the nastiest foes, and those moments of triumph offset the soul-crushing defeats.

The main draw of this expansion is the new arctic area, Hoarfrost Reach. This enormous region is rife with dangers, such as unpredictable avalanches and deep snow. The monsters roaming this landscape fit well, such as the moose-like Banbaro, who uproots trees to slam into you. Hoarfrost Reach is great fun to explore the first few times, but it gets old fast, with around half the missions of the expansion taking place in it. Rather than having another new locale to explore, the other quests take place in the regions from the base game, such as The Ancient Forest and Coral Highlands. The familiarity of these environments ends up being a detriment because fights become predictable, despite the new monsters. More region variety would have gone a long way, especially since this is such a meaty expansion. You fight about 20 monsters – some brand new, and others are variants from World. Some of the variants feel like disappointing reskins with slight attack variations, but the different elements they have add some variety and surprises to fights, such as the Seething Bazelgeuse's scales that burn hotter than normal for bigger explosions.

The new foes make for the best fights. Popular monster Tigrex, who has graced past games in many different forms, makes its return with a nightmarish and deadly charge; the window to dodge is narrow as it razes everything in its path. Learning monster patterns, tiring them out to unload damage, and using the environment to your advantage are all key. Destructible environments and turf wars are also back, with the latter continuing to be the pain that it was in the base game. Turf wars are grandiose, but they happen far too often and unnecessarily prolong fights. Some new combos and moves inject new life into battles, but my favorite new addition is the clutch claw. This grappling hook allows you to launch right onto the monster, and in the case of my light bowgun, I could plant a bomb and jump off for decent damage.

As mentioned previously, this expansion is much more difficult than the base game's campaign. You could get away with doing story quests solo there, but Iceborne isn't as forgiving. Outside of a few missions, expect to depend on SOS flares and coordinating with other players to succeed. One big improvement in this area is that the difficulty scales depending on how many players are in a party at a given time, even when one drops from the battle. Iceborne also doesn't ease you back into the mechanics. Right out of the gate, the monsters hit you like the bitter cold: hard and abrupt, which sets the tone for the expansion. Be warned, the difficulty is uneven. Some monsters absolutely crush you with nasty status effects and powerful attacks, while others seem like push-overs.

At times, I thrived on the challenge, knowing that if I got sloppy, I would walk away with nothing but lost time. It made me experiment much more with my chosen gear, upping my resistances, and equipping the right decorations for perks. My victories felt glorious when I finally downed a monster that I'd been at for a few days. That sense of achievement is hard to top, but the experience of fighting one of these nasty foes is tedious. These show-downs can take close to the 50-minute time limit, and defeat is devastating as you often come away with nothing but wasted items. Some incredibly difficult battles aren't even fun, just maddening, as the odds are so stacked against you that any mistake spells defeat.

Stepping back into Monster Hunter World for Iceborne reminded me how much I adore this game, but it also exposes its flaws. Capcom didn't improve much for the expansion, like once again having a boring tower defense story mission and making you separately watch scenes solo before you can join up in co-op. Even so, surviving together to get that jackpot of materials for better gear hasn't lost its allure, and Iceborne challenges you to be a better player and teammate with its arduous fights. The return trip is worth it, just don't expect many upgrades to the experience. **» Kimberley Wallace**

Control

A heady power trip

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** Remedy Entertainment **Release** August 27 **Rating** M

When Jesse Faden walks into the Federal Bureau of Control and picks up the director's handgun, she inadvertently assumes authority over the enigmatic government organization. The director's gun is a powerful and versatile tool, but it's also a deception; Jesse's greatest weapon isn't the one in her hand, it's the one in her head. Control gives players access a host of powerful psychic abilities that are as satisfying to use as they are to watch. So Jesse has the gun, but she doesn't need the gun. Jesse is the gun.

With games like Max Payne and Alan Wake, Remedy has always put care into telling stories through kinetic action. Control perfectly fits that mold, but it especially excels in its atmosphere. Remedy delivers an eerie, dreamlike experience that is hard to shake off even after you stop playing, and I loved being transported to this bizarrely fascinating world. As you explore the shifting, brutalist architecture inside the Federal Bureau of Control, you encounter an odd cast of amusing characters and interact with several seemingly ordinary objects that hold immense power, such as a mirror that sucks you into an inverted universe or a refrigerator that hurts people when no one is looking at it.

But powerful things are also very dangerous. An aggressive, multidimensional species known as the Hiss are trying to invade our world, and like a champagne cork, the Federal Bureau of Control is the only thing preventing these creatures from spewing into our reality. As you work against the Hiss, you learn more about Jesse's place in this world, and I enjoyed the slow reveal of her backstory. Unfortunately, the motives of the rest of the cast remain incredibly vague, which leads to a few awkward and confusing plot points. Some of these moments are papered over by the overall strangeness of the Federal Bureau of Control, but they did ultimately pull me out of an otherwise expertly crafted world.

As mentioned previously, the director's handgun is an incredibly powerful tool in your battle against the Hiss. This weapon can shift forms, becoming everything from a long-range sniping tool to a crowd-control shotgun. Remedy's gunplay remains as tight and precise as ever, but the director's handgun does have one idiosyncrasy: It can't be manually reloaded. It taps into an unlimited well of ammunition, but every time a magazine runs dry (or if you stop firing for a bit) it takes a few seconds to reload itself. It took me a while to get used to this rhythm in combat, but as Jesse acquires new abilities, managing ammo became less of an issue.

In the end, Jesse's weapon feels like a secondary tool in combat. Her greatest means of offense is her suite of psychic powers – especially her ability to toss objects around the room. Remedy nailed the feel of telekinesis; picking up objects with Jesse's mind and launching them at foes packs a satisfying punch. I never grew tired of pulling chunks of cement out of the ground or snatching missiles from the air and sending them back at a group of foes. Almost every object in the environment can become a bullet, and even in the heat of battle, finding something to launch is easy. In fact, you don't even have to target objects to pick them up. If you hold down the telekinesis button, Jesse grabs the nearest object automatically, which makes using the power effortless and intuitive.

Jesse has a few other useful abilities in her psychic toolbelt, such as grabbing nearby junk to shield herself from frontal attacks. This shield can even be upgraded to propel debris at enemies. Another neat power lets Jesse mind-control enemies, converting hurt foes into allies. These additional powers are fun to play with, but they pale in comparison to the telekinetic launch, and I had few reasons to return to them over and over again. Additionally, upgrading these abilities is rarely satisfying. While each new power provides a wider toolset in combat, most of the upgrades simply increase your damage output, meaning there were no new combat strategies for me to explore in the late game.

Despite a few drawn-out battles near the end, Control is a complete rush. With the power at Jesse's fingertips, I walked into every room ready for an amazing fight. When I walked out, it often looked like a tornado had torn through the building. The Federal Bureau of Control is a fascinating place to explore, and I loved every bizarre encounter inside its creaking hallways.
» **Ben Reeves**

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A secret government agency is being overrun by mysterious creatures from another dimension. Good thing you can move things with your mind

» **Graphics**
Character models and animations look a bit generic, but the visual effects on display are top notch

» **Sound**
An eerie, hyperactive soundtrack helps establish an unsettling mood

» **Playability**
Remedy's games have always felt good, and Control is no exception. Throwing objects around the environment never grows old

» **Entertainment**
Control's intense firefights are fun, but they don't evolve much in the second half. Fortunately, its unsettling mood and explosive moments more than balance the scales

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Telling Lies

A compelling web of deceit

9

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** Sam Barlow, Furious Bee Limited **Release** August 21 **Rating** M

PC • iOS

» Concept
Search through video calls compiled by the NSA to piece together a mystery about four liars who are all connected

» Graphics
The desktop computer aesthetic will be familiar to anyone who has used a Mac, and the glare of a woman's silhouetted reflection in the screen fits the voyeuristic feel well

» Sound
Mellow background music evokes emotion at the right moments. The characters' tone of voice helps you decipher what's real and what's not

» Playability
Swiping to the left or right easily lets you scrub through video content, and the desktop interface is simple to use

» Entertainment
Excellent acting from actors like Angela Sarafyan (*Westworld*) and Logan Marshall-Green (*The Invitation*) brings depth and realism to the characters and their stories

» Replay Value
Moderate

When everything is a lie, how can you discern the truth? Telling Lies asks you this compelling question as you scour through video clips of dishonest people, and the answers can only be found with your own intuition.

Telling Lies is an adventure game from the creator of Her Story, and it takes the same clever concept and interface to greater heights and success. In Her Story, you search through grainy video archives on a retro computer. Telling Lies uses a modern interface, but you still type in clues (like phrases or words found in clips you watch) that lead you towards new videos as you piece together an overarching narrative. While that may sound mundane on paper, it's far from boring in its execution, thanks to phenomenal acting and a deep central mystery with many different threads.

You play as a whistleblowing FBI agent who stole an NSA disk drive, and you plan to upload its contents to the public. The entirety of your time is spent watching, rewinding, and fast forwarding through archived video calls (as well as some clips captured by hidden cameras) found on that drive in hopes of understanding what happened to four connected individuals. I don't want to spoil the mystery, but the main premise is about a special agent infiltrating a certain group of people, and what's most interesting is how this mission affects his life and the people around him. What was the point of this mission? How did a cam girl get intertwined in catastrophic events? I was fixated on finding the answers to these questions and more like them. Telling Lies isn't especially challenging, but that works in its favor; the thrill comes from making connections and watching the pieces fall into place without feeling impeded by mechanics.

The four characters are all lying about something to someone, which makes connecting the dots an exhilarating experience. However, you can only hear the audio and see the video feeds of one person at a time. Sometimes it's abundantly clear who they are talking to, such as a father's animated expressions and simple language pointing to the fact that he's speaking to his young daughter, but other times it's more cryptic. Hearing half the conversation gives you only a fragment of the information you need, and assembling the rest is a lot of fun thanks to thoughtfully placed clues. For example, a tattoo on someone's chest led me towards discovering their identity, since the character's words couldn't be trusted. Sometimes you find the other half of a conversation, and the moments of silence or facial expressions on a previous video make more sense and give you a better idea of what's going on.

The best thing about Telling Lies is the fantastic acting from its cast. Whenever something felt off, like a badly put on Parisian accent, there was a reason behind it rather than an indication of poor acting. I loved getting to know the characters and seeing different sides to each person made them complex and real. This consistency of writing and performance is particulary impressive considering the non-linearity; no two players are likely to watch the same videos in the same order, so the story works regardless of your path through the clues.

Every character behaves differently depending on the situation. They may have a shorter fuse when talking to their wife in comparison to how they speak to their boss. I was utterly fascinated by a man who could commit horrible acts but still be a loving father, and by one woman who was adamant about keeping her identity secret.

Telling Lies is especially interesting in how its themes connect to real-world politics and ethics surrounding privacy when in the hands of a government bureau. I empathized with certain characters, particularly because of their conflicted motives. Viewing different facets of their lives made me feel like a fly on the wall, and this voyeuristic touch bounces between unsettling and engrossing when peeking into these private moments.

Once I discovered the answers to the central mystery, I didn't stop playing – I continued to find every bit of video content I could because I was enthralled by the people in this world. Attempting to understand the psychology behind each character's actions made me all the more invested and perplexed, because in Telling Lies, even the smallest fibs lead to the biggest discoveries.

» Elise Favis

The Dark Pictures: Man Of Medan

Big scares, little substance

Style 1 to 5-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Supermassive Games **Release** August 30 **Rating** M

7

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
A choice-driven horror experience that relies too much on quick-time events, yet still delivers big fright-filled moments

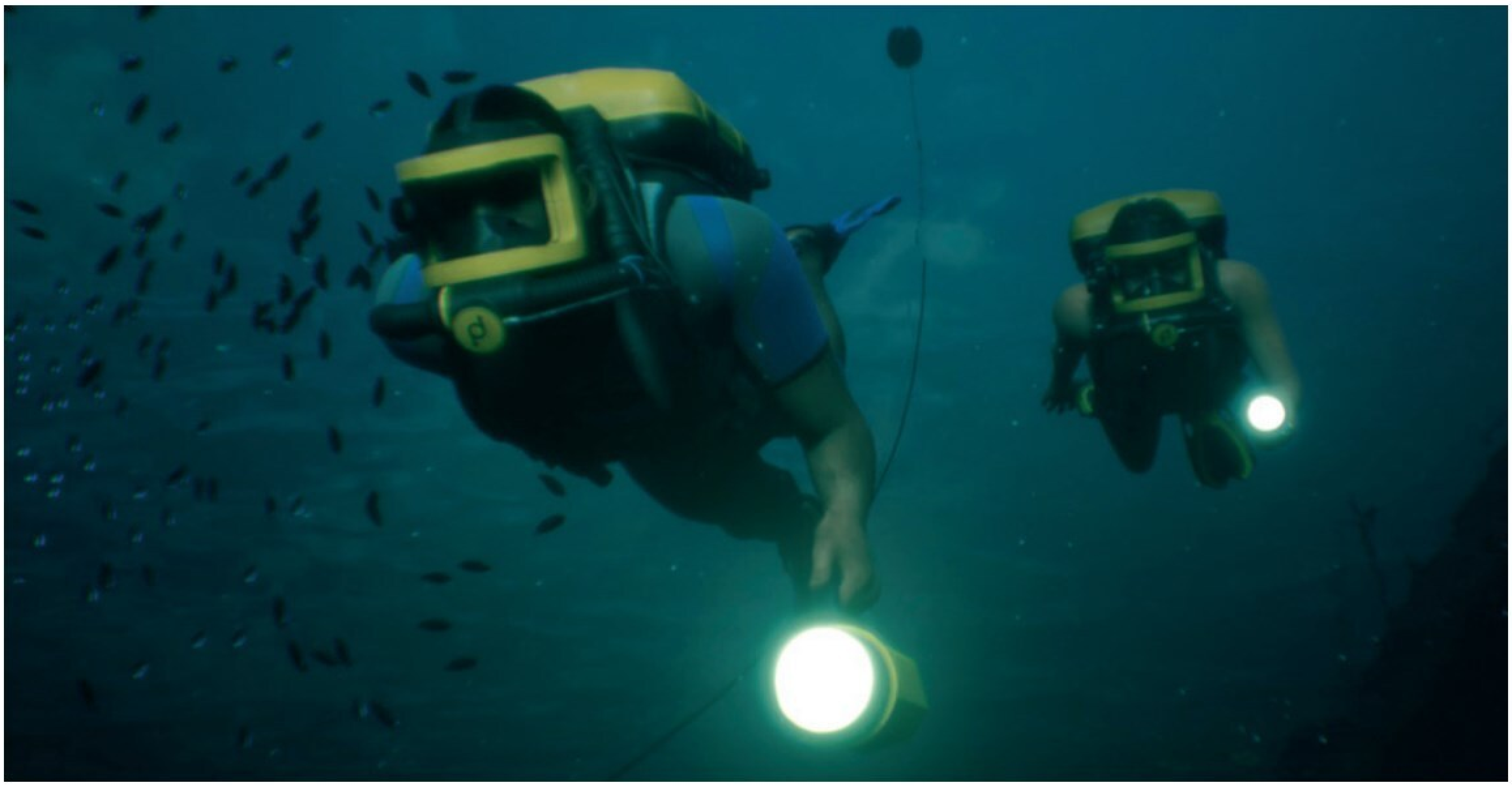
» Graphics
The atmosphere is legitimately creepy, and excellent cinematography and camera placement bring the scares to life. The character and environment details also impress

» Sound
Appropriately eerie to the point that you will question every little "ding" or "thud" you hear

» Playability
Character movement is sluggish, and the reliance on timed button presses makes you feel detached from the action. You don't even get to run on your own

» Entertainment
The uninteresting story has plenty of dull moments, but isn't enough to kill the thrill of trying to keep all of the characters alive, especially when played with friends

» Replay Value
Moderately high



I let out a startled shriek as a two-headed demon leaps into the room. Rather than running away, I stand my ground and jab a knife into the ghoul. Over my Xbox Live headset, my friend screams, "Stop! It's me! You're attacking me!" His words come too late, however; my knife descends into his character's side one last time, stealing his life. My friend and I sit in silence for a few seconds, and then we both burst into nervous laughter over the craziness of what just transpired.

The Dark Pictures: Man of Medan is at its best when you are playing it with friends, either two-player co-op online (which gives you control of different characters at the same time) or with five people in the same room (with each controlling a specific character and passing the gamepad). The reactions from your friends enhance any scenario, whether you pull off a narrow success or miss a button prompt that results in a character's death. In online co-op, even if your characters are together, you may see things your friend doesn't, which fosters a pervasive sense of uncertainty, paranoia, and fear.

Man of Medan is the spiritual successor to Supermassive Games' brilliant PlayStation 4 title, Until Dawn. The studio's fingerprint is immediately recognizable in Man of Medan. The game is brimming with jump scares, life-or-death decisions, and known actors (like Shawn Ashmore, Ayisha Issa, and Pip Torrens). Being able to play this type of horror game with friends brings a fun new wrinkle to Supermassive's formula, but a bland story and poor pacing leads to far too much downtime, and boredom sets in.

Supermassive does a nice job of setting the stage for players through a flashback sequence that shows an old war ship transform into a ghost-infested nightmare filled with dead soldiers. In the five or six hours of gameplay that follow this reveal, not much else happens in terms of narrative build up. I won't spoil too much, but the answers the game provides to your burning questions are not satisfying.

When the five playable characters are introduced, Supermassive spends far too much time developing them, and the experience drags for a good 30 to 40 minutes until they step foot on the ghost ship. Even here, however, the game plods along with little to do or see outside of rusted rooms that may occasionally hold a corpse. Only when a character starts hallucinating does the action pick up, and this doesn't happen enough.

The atmosphere is consistently creepy, and even though not much is happening, Supermassive tries to keep players on their toes with jump scares, such as a steam pipe bursting loudly or a rat jumping out of a box. The scares are done well, and the visuals that accompany them are excellent, both in terms of detail and the cinematography that frames them.

Trying to keep all five of the playable characters alive is the primary goal, and it's a stressful one, as one failed button press can lead to one of their deaths. They all died horribly in my first playthrough, and then I saved two in the next. If that sounds fun to you, to get the most out of it, play the game online with a friend. Those moments where you are separated bring about an intense unease, and hearing what your friend is going through can be quite hilarious for all of the wrong reasons.

Even though you have complete control of your character for exploration purposes, Man of Medan's action feels like it's on rails. If you are shooting a gun or are swinging a wrench, you are asked to move a cursor to a specific location before time expires. When a character runs or jumps, you simply watch it happen and are asked to hit a button at the right time. To stand still in a corner and hold your breath, you perform rhythmic button presses not unlike those in a music game. You never see anything like Until Dawn's environmental interaction, which allowed you to pick if you wanted to run into another room, hide under a bed, or slide into the closet.

Man of Medan isn't the success that Until Dawn was, and it represents a big step back in terms of player interaction and storytelling, but it's still a thrilling horror experience that made me scream, laugh, and want to jump right back in for a second or third playthrough. » **Andrew Reiner**

Oninaki

Floating between life and death

7.5

PS4 • Switch • PC

» Concept
Explore the mysteries of the afterlife as you plow through monsters with the aid of different weapons, powers, and spirits

» Graphics
The environments in Oninaki have a gorgeous simplicity, but the rest of the visuals have an unimpressive, low-budget vibe

» Sound
The music seems sparse, but I enjoy it when it kicks in. The voice performances (which are in Japanese) are minimal

» Playability
Sluggish controls keep the action from feeling as fast and furious as it wants to be, but the overall mechanics are intuitive

» Entertainment
Combat is fun on a basic level, but repetition and a lack of evolution blunt that over time. The story and setting also fail to live up to their initial promise

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Tokyo RPG Factory **Release** August 22 **Rating** T

In the world of Oninaki, death is inevitable, but the aftermath is different. Spirits who are grieved may become shackled to the living world, so everyone tries to approach death with a practical stoicism. However, when playing Oninaki, maintaining that kind of measured neutrality is impossible. This is an action/RPG full of highs and lows, with erratic swings between the two extremes that had me loving it one minute and hating it the next.

The last two games from developer Tokyo RPG Factory (Lost Sphear, I am Setsuna) emulate classic turn-based titles, but Oninaki has more in common with Diablo than Final Fantasy. You control a Watcher, a warrior who can cross the veil to the spirit realm and bond with wayward souls. These souls (called daemons) serve as your companions in battle, giving you weapons and abilities to manage hordes of encroaching enemies. Each daemon effectively serves as a complete build with different strengths and weaknesses, and you can swap among them freely. The speedy scythe daemon is great for mobility and crowd control, while the long-range gun daemon allows you to handle encounters from a distance. When Oninaki is at its best, you are taking down many foes by switching among your favorite daemons, deciding where and when to fire off special moves, and collecting the spoils left behind. It isn't intricate, but it conveys a satisfying sense of power.

Beyond the basic loop, I also got hooked by the daemons' layers of progression. They all have individual skill trees, and you earn points to spend the more you use each ally, encouraging you to keep a rotating stable. In addition to passive and active abilities, the skill tree unlocks memories that tell the story of each daemon and how their lives ended, which adds a cool narrative incentive to experiment with your full range of options.

Diving into these interlocking systems was my favorite part of the whole experience, but the depth in the menus doesn't always translate to gameplay. The enemy types and formations aren't diverse enough to require many different strategies. On one hand, that means that your favorite daemons and abilities never feel completely useless, but it also means that your approach to combat is more of an aesthetic choice than a tactical one. This fosters a creeping sense of pointlessness and repetition as you move from one linear dungeon to the next, because even as you gain new daemons, nothing seems to evolve in complexity.

Another major problem is how the battle system struggles to deliver on the boss fights. While most of the action seems tailored to accommodate many possible playstyles, some of the most critical encounters can only be defeated with a handful of viable strategies. Not only do these difficulty spikes feel unfair, but they also isolate players who may have invested in the "wrong" daemons. In these instances when timing and reactions are important, the sluggishness of the controls is especially damaging. If you didn't spend your skill points on being able to cancel lag after certain maneuvers, you can easily find yourself helpless in the face of an onslaught, unable to dodge or heal as you watch your health drop.

During the first few hours, Oninaki's haunting premise was its biggest draw for me. You jump between realms, undertaking missions for the dead to set their minds at ease. The quest resolutions have surprising and dark outcomes, and you get wrapped up in a plot about reincarnation and a world-eating demon. Those pillars sound cool, but as the story continues, nothing floods in to fill the conceptual gaps. The plot beats and characters all feel like items on a narrative outline, but with none of the connective tissue that makes the events or motivations compelling. It feels like you're watching the summary of a story, rather than experiencing it yourself.

No single flaw in Oninaki is damning, nor is any good quality redemptive. Some parts of the experience are genuinely fun and engaging, and others are baffling and frustrating. Like the real world and spirit realm in the game, the light and dark sides of Oninaki blend together as you move between them, resulting in a dull glow somewhere in the middle. » **Joe Juba**

Rad

Exciting abilities with random frustrations

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Double Fine **Release** August 20 **Rating** T

Rad is a rogue-like taking place in a world that has suffered two apocalypses thanks to mistakes made by The Ancients and additional follow-up mistakes by The Menders (who only made things worse). As a teenager growing up in the post-post-apocalypse, the burden falls on you to explore the procedurally generated wasteland and bring life back to the world. Sometimes it goes well, and you get all the best mutations to help you complete your mission. Sometimes you sprout useless wings, take damage from health items, you lose all your currency, and you wonder what you're doing with your life.

Highs and lows like this are typical of the rogue-like genre, and in many ways Rad sticks close to the rogue script, but it does manage to set itself apart with its leveling mechanics. Combat takes place from an overhead perspective, with the action playing out as a cross between a melee action game and a twin-stick shooter. As you defeat enemies, you build up experience that eventually causes you to mutate. These Exo Mutations are all unique, and even after successful runs and plenty of hours, I still saw new ones. You might sprout a cobra head and be able to perform venomous long-distance strikes. You might gain a tail that lets you lay eggs that birth helpful spiders. The mutations change your appearance and your approach to combat, and you can earn three on a single playthrough, so the combinations go a long way in making each run feel different. I was always excited to see what mutation I was going to get, but some (like the wings mentioned above) are a sign that the current run is a lost cause, which is a bummer.

Along with the Exo Mutations, you also find Endo Mutations, which offer significant passive boosts like imperviousness to fire, faster running speed, or one that makes your long-distance mutations (like a boomerang arm) fly farther. You don't know what they will be until you activate them and they're automatically equipped. Coming across these Endo Mutations is also exciting, but sometimes it doesn't seem to take your loadout into account. Gaining the ability to throw long-distance attacks farther is great, but if your random mutations are all close-range, it feels like a waste.

You can also come across negative Endo Mutations, which is an interesting idea, but they're all so damning that I learned to avoid them at all costs, even with the chance of getting something good. One I came across turned my screen orange making it harder to distinguish items and enemies and just generally made everything look bad. That mutation was active the first time I made it to the final boss, so I didn't even get to see what it really looked like until I got there again on another run. When the negative outweighs the positive so heavily, it discourages you from rolling the dice at all.

I like the look and sound of the world, but the layout can sometimes be frustrating, thanks to the procedural generation. Underground hallways filled with enemies sometimes turn into boring dead ends without rewards, and above ground, necessary switches might be difficult to find or reach. The later stages are particularly labyrinthian; I had one run where I killed every enemy and was just trying to find the exit while outrunning frequent lightning strikes, which eventually caught up with me and killed me. It just felt unfair. I never ran into game-breaking procedural generation, but the annoyances were enough to make me pine for handcrafted levels.

One random element I enjoyed was the world-building. Occasionally, as you find new items or areas, a young woman's voice narrates a random snippet describing what you found, giving you little factoids about what happened and who the various survivors you run into are. These little story moments are short and sweet and don't interrupt gameplay, but they make the world of Rad feel like a real place with history.

The rogue-like is a difficult genre to nail as it relies on balancing challenging action and myriad random elements. The trick is making sure the frustration meter isn't higher than the fun meter, and Rad generally walks that line well. I certainly had my attempts where I felt like the game was working against me, but when I had a good run with mutations that worked well with my playstyle, I enjoyed myself and was thoroughly proud of my accomplishments.

» **Kyle Hilliard**

7.25

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Concept**
Explore a rogue-like post-post-apocalypse while earning game-changing mutations as you defeat enemies and explore

» **Graphics**
The neon-drenched setting is an enticing, overgrown apocalypse obsessed with '80s arcade culture

» **Sound**
The music all sounds like synthy '80s songs and it's great. The infrequent voice announcing various achievements is charming without being obnoxious

» **Playability**
The twin-stick and melee controls work well, though slowdown during rain makes dealing with lots of enemies unnecessarily difficult

» **Entertainment**
Frustrations related to random abilities and level layout can be annoying, but the overall aesthetic is inviting. Successfully completing a run is always an exciting achievement

» **Replay Value**
High

Madden NFL 20

Coming up short

7.5

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** August 2 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept
EA adds to the series' gameplay and modes, but it all feels too similar to make significant progress

» Graphics
The players and their uniform details look good on the field, but some of the player models in the career and franchise modes have strange, oversized heads

» Sound
The commentary is a mix of good contextual lines referring events that happened earlier in the game or even the previous week, but lines predictably repeat as well

» Playability
The new in-pocket QB controls, TE block-and-release function, and pump fake are useful and easy to execute

» Entertainment
The football is fun – helped by gameplay improvements and the X-Factor and superstar abilities. Unfortunately, the limited nature and lack of progress in the franchise and career modes is very clear

» Replay Value
Moderately high

No team starts the season thinking they're going to be average. Coaches and GMs believe they can get the most out of their players. Incoming free agents and rookies improve the roster. Coaches try to outthink the competition with new plays. It all works on paper until it doesn't. Madden 20 claims to improve aspects of its core gameplay and stagnant franchise mode, as well as introduce a new career mode and keep supporting the already-strong Ultimate Team mode. It's a sound game plan, but it doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

Madden 20's gameplay makes a decent first impression. Controlling players in the running game and out in the open feels nice. Both smaller movements with the left stick and gregarious special moves let you weave around and assert your authority. You'll still see animations not sync properly, awkwardly sped up animations, wonky ball and player physics, and oblivious blockers, but for the most part it's satisfying to grab the ball and take control. Users must adjust their pursuit angles and tackles to account for stick skill pros, and the new command to pull down the ball in the pocket increases the threat of mobile QBs. Super-jumping linebackers snagging interceptions has even been fixed.

This year's X-Factor players and superstar abilities integrate well with the overall feel of the gameplay, making you account for special players on both sides of the ball, like getting the ball out quicker because Khalil Mack is coming. Thankfully, they're not so powerful they overtake the game. X-Factors don't occur super often since they require meeting specific goals before they're activated, and they turn off when the player scores a TD or gets tackled for a loss, for instance.

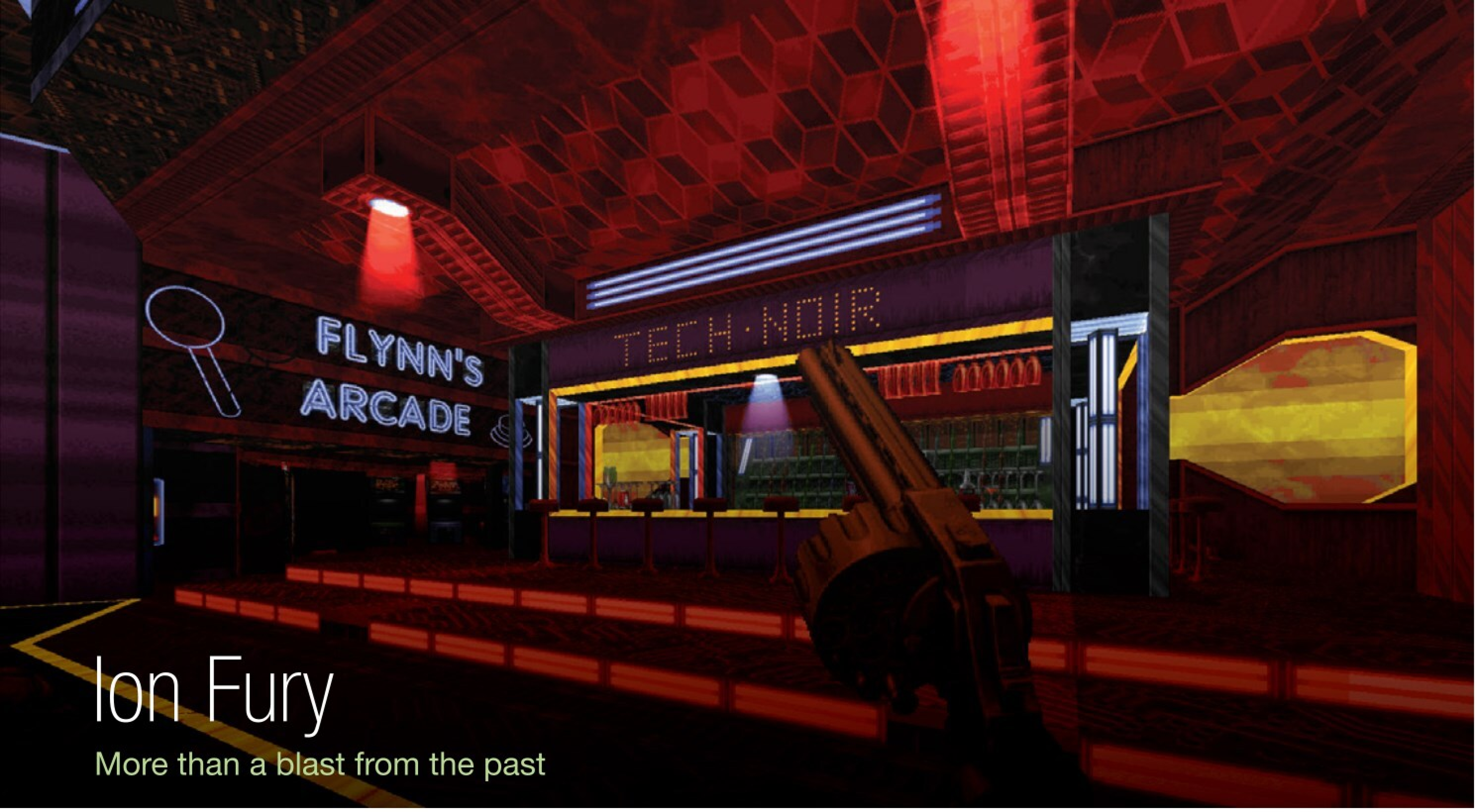
The superstar abilities, which more players have than the X-Factors, are arguably more dangerous since they are always on. For example, they bestow QBs more accuracy or make defenders surer tackles. But on any given play, there are enough variables so an X-Factor or superstar ability isn't working in isolation to overcome every other player on the field. These new abilities help give the game a big-play feel that mimics what we like about the NFL, and since they can be swapped in and out of players in Ultimate Team, they add value and new strategic opportunities to the mode.

These abilities translate to the new QB1 Face of the Franchise career mode where you star as a starting QB, but the mode doesn't make for an illustrious career. The scenario engine that generates conversations with coaches, teammates, and other players doesn't create an interesting story for your character. For instance, the cinematic cutscenes that help give you a backdrop stop after the beginning of the mode. QB1 also doesn't capture the drama and pressure of the NFL. It's simply a mechanism to feed you XP to grow your player. The mode is caught in the middle of trying to tell an interesting story and being a full-blown player career like NBA 2K's MyCareer mode, and it succeeds at neither. Furthermore, on the field, your QB has to rely on not-so-smart A.I. teammates who often don't pick the right hole in the line or catch type for passes.

The scenarios and the XP they generate cross over into the regular Franchise mode (as do the abilities), but these additions don't transform the areas that have needed updating for years. Free agency and the draft are boring. The sim engine can't tabulate realistic game or season stats or trade intelligently. The teams and the league as a whole are void of the intrigue and machinations that fans love. Contracts' total dollar amounts are more realistic, but with simple signing mechanisms and A.I. that can't manage its own rosters correctly, this is a minor improvement.

The one positive facet of Franchise mode is that scouting is more interesting due to a stretch in player ratings and the fact that players can develop into superstars and X-Factors. There's also more competition for the good players due to A.I. scouting being more in line with users' own tendencies.

I like aspects of Madden 20 like the addictiveness and slightly easier progression of Ultimate Team, the way players feel, and the new abilities. But too much remains stagnant and unchanged. It's like expecting a few free agents to change the course of an entire organization when there are key areas the franchise needs to have addressed yesterday. Instead, its roster has gotten old fast and the problems are mounting. » **Matthew Kato**



Ion Fury

More than a blast from the past

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** 3D Realms **Developer** Voidpoint **Release** August 15 **Rating** NA

9

PC

» Concept
Take back a futuristic city from an evil scientist in this ridiculously entertaining retro shooter

» Graphics
The 2D pixel art for characters and weapons is clear and eye-catching, as are the cityscapes and underground lairs you infiltrate

» Sound
The weapons roar and the MIDI rock-and-roll background music rules

» Playability
This twitch-based shooter might take some getting used to if you haven't played one since the '90s (or ever), but the learning curve is fair and mostly gentle

» Entertainment
More than just a throwback to frenzied '90s shooters, Ion Fury is a fantastic game filled with creative weaponry, oodles of humor, and memorable levels

» Replay Value
High

Ion Fury is loud. From its introductory level, packed with hooded transhumanist cultists for you to mow down with your handy revolver, all the way to the epic showdown that marks its end, this is a first-person shooter with no patience for realism or a slow pacing. Ion Fury (formerly called Ion Maiden and inspired by Duke Nukem 3D and Shadow Warrior) is a glorious pixelated playground for you to run around with high-powered weaponry, reducing armies of monsters and henchmen to goo, as you search for countless secrets tucked away at its fringes. It's a hell of a time.

The premise is refreshingly simple. The story leans hard into '80s sci-fi (*RoboCop* in particular), casting you as police officer Shelly "Bombshell" Harrison as she takes on an evil scientist who is turning the citizens of Washington, D.C., into cyborg monsters. This showdown plays out across seven chapters, and I enjoyed every single moment of my ten-hour playthrough. The combat is fun and interesting thanks to weapons that sound powerful and challenging foes. During the campaign, you'll fight decapitated heads roaming around on mechanical spider legs, mechas, cadavers fitted with jetpacks and missile launchers, and a host of other disgusting creations.

One of Iron Fury's most notable accomplishments is the velocity of its action. Movement is fast enough that it doesn't embody the now awkwardly stilted maneuverability of its inspirations, but it's never too fast for the player to control. The action is so balanced even though it's speedy most of the time I felt like a death-dealing force moving at the speed of light as I danced around foes and peppered them with lead. Your arsenal is highly creative and powerful, with each weapon being useful in a number of situations. Even your starter pistol, usually a last-ditch effort in other shooters, is both handy and satisfying in combat thanks to its ability to let you paint multiple targets and then unleash a volley of murderous headshots in one swift motion. Learning the strategies to use with each foe, and then combining those strategies to emerge victorious from overwhelming encounters is much of Ion Fury's charm. I never ran up against an encounter that was unfair, and instead was constantly engaged by how the enemy makeup of each encounter would force me to change my tactics to progress.

The true star of Ion Fury, as it is with the shooters that inspire it, is the level design. The campaign is technically a point A to point B affair all the way through, with loading screens, simple puzzles, and boss fights that punctuate each chapter. However, the levels are massive and creatively distinct. You fight in mansions, malls, downtown districts, metro systems, underground complexes, and even duke it out on a moving train. These levels also contain a ridiculous amount of secrets.

Nearly every environmental fixture you come across in Ion Fury, whether it's a light switch or a refrigerator, can be interacted with. Sometimes that light switch might just turn on the light. Other times, an innocuous switch might open up a floor panel hiding some grenades and health packs to help with the battle waiting just down the corridor. All of these secrets and charms go a long way toward making the already-enjoyable action of gunning down foes more exciting. I always felt like I was exploring something that had been meticulously crafted as opposed to churned out on an assembly line or procedurally generated.

Ion Fury's limited storytelling and humorous attempts are ultimately charming and refreshing, managing to pay homage to the attitude-first persona of Duke Nukem 3D without bringing the icky sexism attached to it. Like Duke, Shelly's got a number of quips she loves to throw out, which do a lot of the heavy lifting to make her a fun, if not particularly deep, character.

Ion Fury is everything that I've wanted from a modernized take on the arcadey shooters of the '90s. The pitch-perfect movement, the enemy variety, creative weaponry, and fantastic level design all add up to a superb shooter campaign. In a sea of retro shooters looking to channel the glory of the genre's early days, Ion Fury emerges as the title that pushes those thrills into the present in an engaging way, deftly capturing their timelessness. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Astral Chain

An explosive battlefield duet

9

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer PlatinumGames **Release** August 30 **Rating** T

Switch

» Concept
Control two characters simultaneously in this science-fiction brawler that delivers fun combat and exploration, but is a narrative mess

» Graphics
The futuristic cityscape is beautifully realized, offset nicely by the red glow of the alien dimension. PlatinumGames knocks the animations out of the park

» Sound
The silent protagonist doesn't work well here, and some of the side players' voices are too much. I love how the music switches from tranquil melodies to roaring heavy metal when combat erupts

» Playability
PlatinumGames does a nice job limiting the awkwardness that usually comes with dual-character support through smartly designed controls and A.I. assistance

» Entertainment
Astral Chain is fun from start to finish, and gives the player plenty to chew on in terms of side missions and upgrades

» Replay Value
Moderately high

PlatinumGames has a long and successful history of making stylish-action games, and Astral Chain is one of its most accomplished and enjoyable entries to date, giving both Bayonetta and Nier: Automata a run for their money. Acrobatic combat is the beating heart of this apocalyptic tale, sending heroes and monsters sailing through the air as swords swing violently and particle effects shower onto the battlefield. This experience also deserves props for its meaningful world building, gorgeous science-fiction visuals, and side activities that range from odd to odder (in a good way).

PlatinumGames also delivers a story with plenty of interesting characters, but its flow is turbulent and all over the place thematically, bouncing chaotically from somber moments to slapstick comedy. You may be mourning the loss of a friend, and then meet a fairy named Bel who watches over the police department's toilets. The tonal shifts are odd, but most of the content is fun or interesting, and you just have to divorce yourself from any given moment to let PlatinumGames take you on this strange-yet-fascinating ride through an inventive vision of the future.

Astral Chain takes place in a megacity called the Ark, a neon-lit metropolis that is thriving despite the world around it being lost. The Ark holds the last of humanity, which has been pushed to the brink of extinction by dimension-jumping aliens called Chimera. As humanity's numbers dwindle, a new hope has just been hatched in a lab – they've learned how to tame the Chimera and transform them into weapons called Legion. The problem with this breakthrough: Only a few people possess the ability to harness the power of the Legion.

Two of these people just happen to be twins, and you choose which one you get to control. Interestingly, the twin you pass on plays a larger role in the narrative than your selected character, since you become a silent protagonist, and your sibling does the talking for you. Yes, this is a strange decision, and your character's constant nodding and "uh-huhing" saps some of the heart from the narrative.

As lengthy and beautifully animated as the cinematics are, any awkwardness melts away quickly once the action kicks in. While you won't see any ideas quite as unconvetional as a woman using her hair as a weapon, the team at PlatinumGames finds exciting ways to innovate on the battlefield, giving the player control of not just one high-flying acrobat, but two at once – your character and the Legion chained to his or her wrist.

Most games that feature dual playable characters embrace the fact that keeping tabs of two moving entities at once can be challenging, often leading to them moving in the wrong directions. You experience a little of this in Astral Chain, but since the A.I. handles the basics of combat and movement, it doesn't mess with your head too much. Your character is more than capable to mop up enemies on his or her own with a baton, gladius, or blaster (all of which can be switched on the fly), but the heaviest hits are delivered by the Legion, and yes, the A.I. is responsible for a lot of them.

Standing back and watching the Legion pummel a beast for you may feel like cheating, but the real challenge and fun comes from creating duets with them, which requires the player to simultaneously execute two orders at once. As you move your character into position for a sword combo with the left stick, you can rotate the Legion using the right stick around an enemy to chain them in place, allowing both heroes to pummel the hell out of it. If

an enemy is about to charge you, you can again control the Legion manually to dash to the side to turn the chain into a trip wire that again stuns the enemy. You can also tell the Legion when to execute its special attacks.

This dual-character system works incredibly well, and is loaded with depth, especially when you unlock all five Legion, each designed to expand combat and exploration options. The Arrow Legion opens up long-range shooting and the Beast Legion can be used as a wolf mount. All five are a blast to control, and not just for combat. The worlds you explore are filled with obstacles that only specific Legion can interact with, as well as light navigation puzzles. The Legion are basically used like Link's items (bomb, boomerang, etc.) in the Zelda games.

They also are used in a variety of side missions, which again are immersion-breaking to the point of taking on a side job to lug around boxes, or helping a man find a burger shop, but the rewards are worth the time. You can power up yourself and the Legion, and also unlock cosmetic items, like a crow that oddly sits on your head.

I had a blast playing Astral Chain and didn't want it to end. Platinum has created a wonderful new universe for players to dive into that I could see extending into anime, movies, and hopefully sequels. The dual-character gameplay is also brilliantly devised, and although not as difficult as PlatinumGames' other titles, it creates a duet that makes you feel like a powerful, unstoppable force.

» **Andrew Reiner**

9 Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers

Platform PS4 • PC **Release** July 2 **Rating** T

Shadowbringers is the best expansion yet for Square Enix's MMORPG. The world comes alive in the player's hands, with weight and gravitas moving you through every whimsical corner. Old-fashioned quest design and color-dodging combat add a dull tinge to a truly magical landscape, but those imperfections can't keep down the scale and scope of excellent environments, grandiose bosses, and majestic music. ***– Daniel Tack***

5 The Church In The Darkness

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • Mac **Release** August 2 **Rating** M

Despite offering myriad endings and some extra content that unlocks the longer you play, The Church in the Darkness does little to justify sticking around to see it. A half-dozen runs will give you a good sense of the narrative scope and gameplay, without offering anything particularly novel or satisfying to keep you invested. ***– Jeff Marchiafava***

7.5 Picross Lord Of The Nazarick

Platform Switch **Release** July 25 **Rating** T

Combining picross with a relatively obscure anime (and not even using the anime's name in the title) is a weird choice, but if you're looking for more picross, you can't go wrong here. The quality-of-life improvements are good, the Color Picross mode is fun, and having a little bit of story is a nice change of pace, even if the plot doesn't have much to it. ***– Kyle Hilliard***

8 Age Of Wonders: Planetfall

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release August 6 **Rating** T

Building a sustainable empire and managing a happy populace takes some grunt work, but they are really just stepping stones to Age of Wonders: Planetfall's epic firefights. ***– Ben Reeves***

8.5 Remnant: From The Ashes

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** August 20 **Rating** M

Strong systems and a satisfying gameplay loop give Remnant: From The Ashes a powerful foundation, even if the experience is mired by repetitive and uninteresting bosses and environments. ***– Daniel Tack***

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Modernizing The Frontlines

How Infinity Ward turned Call of Duty on its head and transformed it into the world's biggest entertainment franchise

In 2007, all eyes were on Halo 3. While Call of Duty had a dedicated fanbase, Microsoft and Bungie's first-person shooter was the genre's undisputed king. After Infinity Ward's Call of Duty 2 served as one of the Xbox 360's tentpole launch titles, Treyarch's Call of Duty 3 released as one of the weaker entries in the still-nascent franchise. With the series shifting back to the hands of the studio that created it, Infinity Ward began exploring ways to right the Call of Duty ship and compete with the juggernaut Halo series.

by Brian Shea

Infinity Ward was determined. The team wanted to make a modern shooter but didn't have permission just yet. However, it did have another objective. "It was a moment where we really wanted to take down Halo really bad," art lead Joel Emslie says. "We wanted to create a Halo killer. Part of the studio went off and was working on another game to do that."

To compete with the genre-leading franchise, Infinity Ward split to work on two projects: a World War II game called Call of Duty 4, and a science-fiction title meant to tackle Halo head on. However, once the team got the go-ahead to make a modern shooter, development ceased on both projects, and the team reunited to work on the studio's first game set in modern times.

The division of the team was necessary to explore the different ideas, but the team knew splintering the talent was ultimately a detrimental practice. "The whole Infinity Ward experience is what we make is the sum of the parts, like all the components work together," Emslie says. "When you had components missing, it threw the whole thing off balance, and that's why it was realized pretty quickly, thank God, and they brought everybody back together, and then we dug into Modern Warfare."

The developers were excited to make a game with a distinct flavor from its past work, but it immediately noticed that the years of working on World War II games locked their specialties into that time period. However, Infinity Ward realized that now, instead of talking to retired soldiers about what it was like when they were on the ground in the war, the team could go visit active military bases and learn first-hand stories about what soldiers do today and what combat is like on a contemporary battlefield.

While these stories inspired the team and undoubtedly contributed to the campaign, the level designers struggled to make areas that felt authentic. “We had a lot of problems with CoD 4 because we were going from historic-based levels and content to made-up stuff,” designer Geoff Smith says. “I remember early on, a lot of us kept thinking that it feels too James Bond and didn’t feel legit. It took a long time for us to internalize that and become okay with creating new things and still making them feel real. Single-player took a lot of restarts and rejiggering to get the formula down.”

As part of those restarts, two campaign levels that were in development for around six months each were cut because they didn’t feel right. The first one, called Descent, featured a large, circular bunker where players went deeper as the mission continued. The team felt it was “too James Bond,” but took ideas from it into another level that made it into Modern Warfare 2: The Gulag. The second cut mission was Sea Night Defend, which presented a situation similar to *Black Hawk Down*, where players would make their way through crowds of civilians, but that concept couldn’t come together due to fidelity issues dealing with crowds.

With the missions that did make the cut, Infinity Ward created one of the most beloved shooter stories of all time. The nuclear blast scene, which occurs during the Shock and Awe mission, stuck with players over the years, with the haunting image of a mushroom cloud looming over a destroyed Iraqi town. While the scene is iconic to this day, some developers, particularly the art team, hated the scene at first.

“I fired it up and I was like, ‘What is this bulls---?!’,” Emslie says. “I looked at somebody like, ‘Well I get up, right?’ and they’re like, ‘No, you f---ing just die.’ And I was, ‘This is s--- gameplay! What is this? I can’t win! Like, why do I want to play a game I can’t win? F--- that s---.’ I was so pissed off, but I didn’t know what I was saying, obviously.”

“Our boss at the time, I said the same thing to him. He looked at me and was like, ‘What? It’s going to be f---ing awesome. Don’t worry about it,’” animator Mark Grigsby says. “And I was like, ‘Nah dude, this is f---ing garbage. This is f---ing stupid.’”

“Halo Killer” Leftovers

While the “Halo killer” prototype the team was working on never surfaced and we never saw any kind of assets created for it, Infinity Ward did finally create a full science-fiction game with 2017’s Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare. However, the team involved with the early prototype didn’t recognize any ideas or assets from the “Halo killer” in that game. Instead, the only thing that looked familiar to them was the Crytpid alien race that served as the main antagonists in Call of Duty: Ghosts’ Extinction mode.

Both Emslie and Grigsby admit they were wrong and, in the words of Emslie, "smarter people knew what they were doing," but for the game's other most memorable sequence, All Ghillied Up, the team was excited from the start. The flashback sequence put you in control of Captain Price stealthily sniping through the abandoned areas surrounding Chernobyl in one of the eeriest, most intense portions of the game.

"There was a feeling about that level," Emslie says. "I don't know if it was the mystery you get of abandoned places, and there was something about that environment that was so spooky."

Emslie was excited to create a ghillie suit that actually camouflaged players. However, the lighting kept changing every time he got the suit working, and eventually he lost his temper with the lighting team. "I finally hit the end of my rope with somebody changing the lighting, and I went and I barked at somebody and I really bummed them out," he says. "I forgot who it was, but I hurt his feelings really bad. I'm like, 'You keep f---ing changing the goddamn lighting!' I'm not kidding: I recalibrated the ghillie suit maybe just under 20 times because they couldn't make up their mind."

When the time came for Infinity Ward to pull back the curtains on Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, things could have gone better. Media reception at E3 2007 was positive, but a single-player reveal event held at Universal CityWalk in Hollywood did little to instill confidence in the studio. The team roped off an area in the popular shopping area and the developers showed up for the event, but something wasn't quite right.

"We were ready to sign [posters] and we were ready for the hordes of fans to show up, and nobody showed up," Emslie says. "I remember standing within earshot of two journalists and one of them said, 'Man, I feel sorry for these Infinity Ward guys.'"

The event brought the team, which was very enthusiastic about its work, back down to earth. However, they knew they had a great game, and that once people got their hands on the multiplayer, it could change everything.

"We always do this thing called Friday Night Fights, where we all play

One-Upping Themselves

After the success of Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare's campaign, Infinity Ward felt the need to one-up itself with the sequel's story. With sniper missions in Chernobyl and players coming face to face with a nuclear blast, the studio had set a high bar to try and clear with Modern Warfare 2, and the team acknowledges it may have worked to the game's detriment.

"I feel like we always crank things to 11 in our follow-up titles," designer Geoff Smith says. "CoD 1 has great pacing and downtime and quiet moments, and in CoD 2, we were like, 'Oh, everybody loves the intensity, so let's crank it up!' So a lot of CoD 2 was really intense. Go back to CoD 4 … nice pacing … but what happened in MW 2? 'Crank it up again!' Like, we don't learn, you know?"

While the second campaign in the Modern Warfare series is still well liked, it didn't have the impact of the first game's story. One scene, however, courted controversy and remains a topic of debate a decade later. No Russian put players in the shoes of a character trying to convince a Russian terrorist cell he can be trusted, but in doing so, he needs to join the terrorists as they kill civilians in a crowded airport.

The scene proved controversial, but Infinity Ward understood why the backlash was there, as even they were split on how to approach the level. "No Russian polarized this studio," art lead Joel Emslie says. "There was a side of the studio that felt that it should be played from the perspective of a security guard that got caught up in it, then there was the other side that liked the way it was going."

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Gaish St.
ميدان العباسية
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MP on Friday nights," Smith says. "We knew something was there when we're all getting calls from girlfriends and wives of, 'Where are you on Friday night?' It's 10:30 or 11 o'clock and people just aren't stopping. People were just opting in to play the whole night, and I think that's when it started turning."

Fans got that widespread opportunity two months prior to launch with a beta test that ran on Xbox 360. The beta showed fans what the multiplayer was all about and allowed them to get their hands on the shooter for an extended period. More importantly, it let players wrap their heads around the new killstreak mechanic, which rewarded players for consecutive kills without dying. The system was instrumental in adding that extra hook to the multiplayer modes and has influenced countless other games both inside and outside of the Call of Duty series.

Upon launch, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare was immediately successful. The game achieved an elite score of 94 out of 100 on review-aggregate site Metacritic, and it accomplished what Infinity Ward set out to do in the first place: take down Halo. Despite Halo 3 outselling the Xbox 360 version, when you combine both the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare sold nearly seven million copies worldwide. Call of Duty was now a household name, and two years later, Call of Duty 4's direct sequel, Modern Warfare 2, secured the top spot once again – and the series has yet to relinquish that claim in any subsequent years.

The Call of Duty franchise has remained atop the video game industry ever since the launch of the original Modern Warfare, an impressive feat for an annualized franchise spread across multiple development studios. While other games in the series have outsold Call of Duty 4, Modern Warfare has been a gold standard for the franchise and the genre. Now, with Infinity Ward reimagining the Modern Warfare series, along with several key members of the original team returning to the studio, the spirit of what the developer did with Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare is alive and well. ◆

Complete The Company Name

We're on a first-name basis with a lot of video gaming companies. For instance, when was the last time you said "Rockstar Games" instead of the far punchier "Rockstar?" With that in mind, let's put your skills to the test and see if you can match up the first part of a studio or publisher's name with its admittedly less interesting caboose. Some answers will be used more than once, and some names require you to combine two answers, just to keep you on your toes. Good luck! *by Jeff Cork*

1. **343**____________________
2. **Arc**____________________
3. **Arkane**__________________
4. **Bethesda**________________
5. **Blizzard**________________
6. **Bohemia**________________
7. **Dontnod**________________
8. **Epic**___________________
9. **Gearbox**________________
10. **Grasshopper**_____________
11. **Insomniac**______________
12. **Intelligent**______________
13. **IO**____________________
14. **Kalypso**________________
15. **Kojima** ________________
16. **Monolith**_______________
17. **NetherRealm**____________
18. **Obsidian**_______________
19. **SIEBend**________________
20. **Sledgehammer**___________
21. **Sony**___________________
22. **Tango**__________________
23. **WarnerBros.**_____________
24. **Xbox**___________________

A. Entertainment
B. Game
C. Games
D. Gameworks
E. Industries
F. Interactive
G. Manufacture
H. Media
I. Productions
J. Software
K. Softworks
L. Studio
M. Studios
N. System
O. Systems
P. Works

Answers: 1. E, 2. N and P, 3. M, 4. K, 5. A, 6. F, 7. A, 8. C, 9. J, 10. G, 11. C, 12. O, 13. F, 14. H, 15. I, 16. I, 17. M, 18. A, 19. L, 20. C, 21. F and A, 22. D, 23. F and A, 24. B and M

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